EVE:

An Incident of Paradise Regained

BY

MAARTEN MAARTENS

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THE GAMBIT

THE central fact of this volume is ancient and eternal as the dream of Paradise. But my resolve to develop it on the lines here followed dates from the evening when I finished reading Theodor Fontane's famous novel "Effie Briest." I there and then diffidently but deliberately set myself to attempt the same thought, with a difference. The result is this book.

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CHAPTER I

THE early mist cleared slowly, in promise of a golden morn.

The pink house, with its lines of green shutters, slid into view, amongst its roses, terraced and trellised, low and long on the gentle grass-slope, against chestnut and beech.

A window sprang open, and the Melissants, father and mother, came out on to their wide bedroom balcony. They stood gazing at the familiar, unfamiliar scene.

"Jove! I never saw it look so jolly!" said Melissant.

"Again?" Mevrouw Melissant put back a restive curl from her bright forehead. "My dear boy, suppose you tried a more original remark?"

"Men can't make original remarks to their wives after twenty-one years of marriage," answered Melissant. "Now, only look at that!"

For the grey film had parted in the summer distance, and the silver riband of the river shot up through it, glittering between the wide orchards of the Betuwe, under the swiftly deeper blue of an unclouded sky.

"A perfect day!" said Melissant. "A perfect memory. Perfection."

Marie Melissant nodded. "Unpleasant things must have occurred," she said. "You wisely forget."

"Do you remember?"

"Well—no. Nothing worth recalling."

"You are wiser than I," he hurried on in eager argument. "We have never any of us been really ill. I don't count the mumps. There has always been money enough. Not too much. And even our unlimited leisure has not caused us to quarrel."

"True. I am grateful to you, Lourens, for the discreetness of your flirtations. Considering what opportunities you have had."

"You have had more, and showed far greater reserve, as a woman should." He drew her apologetically towards him. "Come, come! These are 'tempi passati.' You are nearly forty. I am over forty. We are both very young."

"And have four children, ageing fast. Why did not these—moral reflections occur to us last year?"

"We were too much taken up with the celebrations. Twenty! That's a recognisable date. What a festa the children made of it! But to-day is the sort of anniversary one keeps to themselves. Is that grammar? It's sense. Our married life has come of age. No wonder we feel grave!"

"Oh, not grave. It's not so bad as that! 'Grave' is a doctors' word." Mevrouw Melissant took a biscuit from her early tea-tray for the birds. Melissant had not exaggerated. He and his wife were still young; they were still good-looking. And pleasant-looking. They would probably look pleasant, and handsome, for a great many years to come.

The sun, that had been awake for hours—that barely gets to sleep in these young days of July—the sun streamed his warm radiance over the garden, licking up the dew-drops in their millions, illumining the shiny rhododendron bushes, making a great glow upon the cool green lawn. A cart passed in the sunk road, with a whistling baker's lad. Over yonder lay the river, an orange sail double against its placid glass.

"The ring of Polycrates," mused Melissant, suddenly, aloud. His voice had changed. She looked up at him—he was just a trifle taller—with mild inquiry.

He laughed. "'Tis an old Greek story; didn't you hear about it in the school-room?"

"No. Remember, they taught me nothing, just as they tried to teach you too much."

"And the result is the same. But this story has stuck in my brain. Everyone must have his share of trouble, it says. If the gods forget your share, try to select it. Otherwise they're apt to make up for lost time. So Polycrates flung his greatest treasure into the sea."

"What was his greatest treasure? I shall never dare to go yachting with you again."

"A ring. A fisherman found it in a fish. So Polycrates was slain that night."

But she only laughed, a brighter laugh than his. "I like your 'so.'"

He persisted. "No, really, we have been too happy. Look around. The gods give and take."

"The voice is the voice of Esau," she murmured, and rubbed his rough flannel sleeve, "but the words are the words of Jacob. I married Esau, please! Because, as he told me at the time, he snatches at anything nice that stills the moment's hunger. And like me, he's always hungry. I feel sure I should have rejected the timid Jacob, if he'd worked one-and-twenty years for a reward." Again she glanced up at him, as archly as one-and-twenty years ago. "And what a reward? Me!"

"Did Jacob wait twenty-one years? Goodness! I should have proposed to twenty-one other girls. We could only have started to-day."

"I'm not sure I've got my facts. They're in a book you and I haven't studied much. But you remember how the words go in Victor Hugo's School Dialogue, where Esau says:

'Brother, thy God is a Merchant, but mine is a Prince!'

Good, isn't it? You have never worked for anything, Lourens, nor have I. And our god is a very debonnaire prince, and we've never even pretended to

thank him. I think it's rather shabby of you to talk of Poly—what ?"

Melissant drew a deep breath of relief. "After all, a man mostly makes his own trouble," he said. But his eyes sought the silver riband, and the lofty sunlight across it, with an unwontedly wistful look.

"Makes it by calling it trouble. I don't think I like coming of age. I prefer the old irresponsibility; it has worked so well. 'Close your eye on the ugly side, and it isn't there.' Whose wisdom is that ?"

"Mine? I hope not. Look here, a man's wisdom always sounds idiotic, quoted at him. If I ever did say anything so sensible, it isn't fair!"

"Life has been good to us hitherto," she said, closing her eyes. "We've enjoyed it; we're going to enjoy it a lot more. 'That's sense,' as you say."

"Who knows what's round the corner?" he answered. He pulled himself together. "Oh, I say, I can't help it! I suppose it's the 'twenty-one.' I remember I felt bad when I came of age. It seems like yesterday. So I built this house and married you."

"Two foolish acts that turned out well."

"I don't deny it. We were two children, and neither your good-natured step-mother nor my ill-natured guardian had ever taught us anything worth knowing. You had nothing to remember, and I had heaps to forget. We found life unexpectedly, the day I was twenty-one, like a pearl in the desert, and proceeded to make the best of it."

"I am more than satisfied," she said. "And you?"

"Nearly quite. I am greedier. You must leave your husband his moods. They suit him. And a taste of the cork, from time to time, only adds to the value of the wine!"

"A taste of the cork isn't the same as a taste for the cork," she answered quickly. "Wait till the corked bottle comes."

"Oh, no; then I shall refuse to drink it. There's no pleasure in that."

"You're as bad as when you found your first grey hair. Years ago!" she answered meditatively.

"Oh, cruel!"

"No, for we never found a second. Oh, yes, we looked for it. Eva did, I believe. That whole day you said you were going to do something, only you couldn't think what. You had quite wit and ignorance enough to succeed."

"You have more wit and ignorance than I!"

"Not more wit. Mine is reflected light, like the moon's! Well, you must think of something to do. Only don't do it!"

"The children!" he said with much hesitation. "Sometimes I think—well, you know, they're outgrowing childhood. Eva's nineteen."

"Is that it?" she cried. "The last thing I should have thought of! You who always say a child should educate itself!"

"Ours have certainly had a minimum of education."

"And a maximum of enjoyment. We have given them the one thing we missed—a happy youth. Whatever happens, they can always remember that. And if the worst comes to the very worst, we shall always have—shall we not?—all of us, bread-and-jam out of the funds."

The clouds swept from Melissant's face as a breath from a mirror. "Delightful words," he cried. "The funds! The capitalist's unearned reward! And jam! The innocent's joy! Sweet, purple, unadulterated jam! No powder! The kindly fruits of the earth, ripe in your youth, and when you grow older, preserved! How about the bread of toil, the sweat of your brow?"

She drew some sort of gauzy rag about her shoulders. "There are sweats and sweats, if we are to speak so plain," she said. "Did you never see how some men boil over, dancing?"

"Yes. I should have stopped."

"Be thankful you can dance and keep cool. For we're not going to stop. We're going to dance twenty-

one years longer. Forty-two. To dance with those four nice children. New, lovely dances. And in the ntervals, to eat only cake and jam. If we don't get hot and sick over it, as the pious people'd like us to, that isn't *our* fault. The gods don't want us to feel sick. And you needn't talk nonsense about bread of toil, Lourens, for they didn't have that *inside* Paradise." She leant up against his shoulder; the ripple of her laughter ran away into the roses overhead.

"Do you know why we are still inside Paradise?" she said.

"No. Because we never tried to get out."

"Just so. Because we've never cared to distinguish between good and evil. And we're not going to begin now."

"All right," he said. "And if worry did come—about the children, for instance, as they grow up—we wouldn't let it worry us!"

"It's never come yet. You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

As they stood there, hushed for a moment, in the unfathomable sweetness and beauty all around them, he drew, very slowly, from his little finger, a narrow circlet of gold with a great emerald, and flung it in a vehement flash of the arm far away out of sight, lost in the massed shrubbery, beyond the lawn. All the perky sparrows scattered, stopped. She cried out.

"I *am* ashamed," he said.

"Your ring!"

"I had to do it. When one has to, one has to, you know. And now I sha'n't worry a bit."

She was gazing at his hand. "But it's the emerald I gave you when Eva was born! The first child! The stone of hope!"

"True. But I couldn't throw away my only other one"—he held up his wedding ring.

"You're quite right," she said suddenly. "I think it is a charming idea. Just the thing for an ancient, or a very modern, lover of pretty thoughts to go and do.

And for Victor Hugo to write a pretty little poem about. We must make him. A sort of surety for the children's happiness! I've caught your idea! It's your knack, Lourens, of doing the most beautiful thing in the most beautiful way."

"You take it in a wedding-morning mood," he said, rather shamefaced.

She put her arm round his neck. "I take it exactly as you offer it. We will keep the little transaction quite to ourselves, like this whole little absurd anniversary. None of the children have rememberied the date. It was clever of you to choose this day for the annual dull dinner-party. That's quite put them off the scent. The poor things made enough jubilee-fuss over us last year."

He kicked at the stucco balustrade. "I loathe dull people."

"We've got the whole fifteen. How many families with such dozens of friends could ask all the dull ones to a single party."

He laughed savagely. "Why not make a mistake over the mushrooms, and have only nice friends in the future?"

"You *are* greedy."

"One's friends are all-important. Especially to people with a daughter, aged nineteen."

"There again! I plead guilty. Eva is nineteen."

"I am quite resolved not to worry. Still, supposing she married one of the people coming to-night?"

"She won't. All our children loathe dulness as much as we do."

"Yet the three young men coming to-night are very worthy," he smiled.

"Not of her. And I fear the children have not been taught to love worth."

"They have not. Nor had you. Yet you married me." He kissed her softly on her full, soft cheek.

A great rose fell past them, to their feet, with a dull thud.

Looking up they saw their elder daughter embowered in the roses above them.

"Good morning, dear Children!" said Eva Melissant.

They nodded to her. She sank back from her window, out of sight. Then, suddenly, she flung herself forward again, into the golden blaze:

"What a day!" she exclaimed. "Oh, father, what a day! Was there ever such a glorious place as this?"

Melissant did not immediately answer. He was looking down at his left hand. Then he laughed up to her: "Yes," he cried, "four thousand B.C.!"

CHAPTER II

"I CALL a council," said Eva Melissant, immediately after breakfast. "In the orchard, as usual. No, it's too hot. Here in the verandah. The Children are excluded, of course."

"Why?" demanded Fritz. There were four young Melissants: Eva, Fritz, Marthe and Mom. "The Children," by mutual consent, were the parents. Q.E.D.

Eva, unable to answer courteously, kept silence. For the merest capacity could comprehend that the Children were excluded because the meeting was about them. Fritz had brains, she thought, regular as clock-work, but he seldom troubled to wind them up. Her gaze rested on the three figures sprawling over basket-sofas and chairs. "Figures" is not accurate. Only Marthe's orange locks were visible, Mom's boots.

"Idiots!" spurted Eva at last.

"Oh, I say!" All three spoke at once.

"I include myself."

"The proposition is partly proved," declared Fritz, who was an ornament, at the tail end, of the fifth form.

"There's no time for nonsense. In fact, we've not a moment to spare."

"Mom," remarked Fritz, "there's a disgusting hole in your left sole."

The boots rushed down with a bang, and a boy's face shone into view, suddenly scarlet. "They're nearly new," said Mom. "Nobody ought to be obliged to wear the same pair twice!"

Eva rapped the table. "To-day is the eleventh!"

"The match is to-morrow," came from under the bright locks.

"Just so, and we've none of us remembered the day before. I call it beastly selfish."

"It's too hot for riddles," yawned Fritz. He laughed. He was, perhaps, the best-looking of the whole good-looking lot.

"The eleventh!" repeated Mom thoughtfully. "I was ill, last year, on the twelfth!"

"Ah, *you* remember! I didn't, till I saw them standing under my window, kissing in the early sun. Dear things!"

"Flags, flowers, fireworks!" cried Marthe.

"And a youth who played Raff's Cavatina——"

"And drank too much champagne," cut in Fritz, nodding as seventeen nods to fourteen at school. "But that was last July, Eva; we can't get up such doings every time!"

"That's what they've been saying to each other, and that's why they've taken to-night of all nights for the Dull Party. So you can sit on the stairs and gorge!"

"La—how grown-up!"

"And guzzle!"

"So could you, last Dull Party!"

"I *could*. 'Tempi passati,' as father says. Now I shall have to sit inside and say: 'Oh no, thank you! No more champagne!'"

"I shouldn't say that," advised Mom.

"No," scathingly remarked Fritz. "You'd sing out, 'More jelly!' That's why they can't have little boys in."

"Father eats too much jelly," protested Mom.

"Did he advise you to take him as an example?"

They all laughed: Eva a little later, a little slower, than the rest.

"Order!" she said. "I think it's just sweet of them."

Mom bent forward, flushed. "You think the Children particularly unselfish?"

"Of course, you little——"

"Whoa!" cried the boy, falling back. "All right!"

"We all know how they hate the Dull People. But they want you to enjoy yourselves, on the sly. Well, they *must* have their own fuss. A nice fuss. You follow me?" She stared into three expectant faces, for Marthe's had come round the red baize of her chair.

"We must give them a surprise party," said Eva, with a rippling solemnity. "All their very nicest friends immediately on top of the Dull People. Have everybody in after dinner, without letting the Children guess."

"But what'll the Dull People say?" ventured Marthe.

Nobody doubted that the Children, universal approvers, would approve.

"Perhaps they'll all stop away next year! We'll none of us grieve over that." Eva sighed with the air of a martyr. "How I wish we'd already reached the dessert."

"What's the ice?" exclaimed Mom.

"How should I know, child?" .

"I hope it's strawberry!"

"Ask cook to make it. Look here—won't it be fun?" A triumphant laugh broke along her bright voice. "The in-pour of all the nice people! We must all scatter now, so as to get through with our invitations! Say for ten or nine-thirty!"

"But what do you expect to do with them when they're here?"

"Oh, we shall amuse them, of course. I'll ask Victor Hugo. He'll get up something appropriate. Like last year, but much simpler. Now the first duty is to count them up!"

"I know a list of them," said Fritz. "In one of father's drawers."

"Bravo! Get it!"

"It's the one they made out when grandfather died."

Eva shivered. "Oh, not that!"

"Why, you silly? Nervous?"

"Not nervous—silly. It sounded ugly. This is a

wedding. Weddings ought not to be connected in any way with death."

"Widows' weddings are," suggested Marthe.

"Distantly," said Eva. "At least they ought to be. Now let's hurry! Marthe, supposing you go and talk over the buffet, with cook, and order things from the confectioner's; and Mom can choose his ice. I'll see to the flowers, and I'll telephone to the piano-man. And you boys must bicycle round; divide the list between you, Fritz. What a—what's the word?—provident thing it was of them to go and get married just inside your holidays! So few parents would have considered that!"

"So few children mind!" nodded Marthe, on the threshold.

"Mind what?" questioned Fritz. But the girls were gone. In the hall-door Eva was stopped by her father.

"And what is my little girl going to do this fine morning?" he asked.

"Your big girl is going to pick flowers."

"An excellent occupation. So manifestly un-useful. Now if you were really a big girl you would——" He paused.

"What should I?"

"I was thinking of the dozens of things big girls do now-a-days. I'm so glad you do none of them. Study law, for instance, like your friend, Cissie Brent?"

"I sha'n't put any of my flowers in your room," she said.

"Come into my room when you've done, and I'll show you such a funny thing in 'Le Rire.' See how I heap coals of fire on your head!"

"Cheeks, father!" she flung back, laughing. "No, I'm not going to look at anything—not anything, mind you!"—she shook her finger at him—"in 'Le Rire' again."

"Good Lord!" he said. He gazed at her, puzzled, annoyed. "I'm sorry," he said, turning away with a momentary cloud about the eyebrows. "I have overrated my powers of selection."

"Oh, now, father, you're vexed!" She caught at his hand.

"Then let's think of something pleasant at once!"

"Why, you've lost your ring!"

"What a queer choice of a pleasant subject! Yes, I've lost my ring. I went a long walk in the woods and dropped it. There's not the slightest chance of my ever finding it again.

"But you had it last night?"

"Had I? So I had. I dropped it this morning. A long way from here. Well, it's gone."

"But we could look for it! Have it cried!"

"My dear child, how energetic you are! I have never looked for anything I lost. You cannot imagine how much time—and trouble—I have saved."

The girl, in her white dress, with her fair face, stood beside her florid, flannelled father. The roses were all about the verandah, the rosy rosies! The warm air was tremulous with summer, redolent of life and of light.

"If one lost what was really precious?" said the girl. "What was worth going back for? All the way!"

"You wouldn't find it," he said. "And you would miss the much nicer thing, just round the corner, when you turned. Go and pick your flowers, Eva! At your age you will always find a finer rose—on the next bush."

She sought no answer. She went down the long pathway, her basket upon her arm.

He watched her. Then he entered his room, through the French window, laughing. He glanced at the mantelpiece. Ten. It might just as well have been eleven. For all he cared. From the sofa he took up a French novel of the moment. He had read but few books. He had never in his life read the same book twice.

CHAPTER III

"SIT down, Victor Hugo! Collect your brains!" Eva flung herself, not ungracefully, on the nearest bench. She had been dashing about all the morning. She was flushed.

Victor Hugo extended a hollow, hollowed hand.

"Huh?"

"I have wasted a certain amount of them on you, Freule Eva."

"Don't be stupid. You've plenty left. Cudgel them."

"Cudgels are for asses," said the young man, quite cross.

"Now please, don't get into one of your tempers! As I told the boys, we haven't time. We look to you, as usual. If you feel tired and hot, so do I."

"Permit me to point out that you are hot and tired over your own affairs, Freule Eva."

"Victor Hugo, I do believe you grow ruder every time you pass a fresh exam. Man, can't you enjoy the beautiful weather?"

"I've a headache." Not that he seemed anxious to avow the fact.

"Again! Oh, you poor fellow! How sad to have pain on such a fine day! Or on any day! Let's go across to the shade. What can I do for you? I'll get you a cabbage-leaf—shall I?—from the kitchen garden!" She jumped up. "Meanwhile, do try to think of something for to-night? Your reputation is at stake!"

The young man—not so young, for he must have been near thirty—tacitly accepted both the offer and the commission. He was accustomed: and the queerest things don't look queer, if they've never been done different.

He was the only son of the Melissants' gardener and factotum. Melissant, never grateful half-way, declared the smooth wheels couldn't move without old Perk.

Victor Hugo's baptismal name was Piet. Alas for him !—Melissant had once carelessly inquired what the small boy intended to become—" a gardener like your father ? "—" No a poet, like Victor Hugo "—the thing was done.

Such mishap is the natural outcome of French and English, according to the modern fad, at the village school.

The name stuck, all the more, when the lad perpetrated occasional verses, festive rhymes. A neat little birthday ode to Mevrouw Melissant met with the reward of a nickel watch from the amused lady and a sound thrashing from the enraged father. That was too bad ! Over the discovered beating Lourens Melissant, unable to endure the idea of suffering, had his only furious row with his masterful retainer. " He shall learn what he likes ! " commanded, Melissant. " Lord, to think that he likes ! "

Of course this boy liked, a sickly boy, whose only digestive organ seemed intellectual. He was abnormally gentle to the child Eva, in whose coming he had been abnormally interested before he knew she was born. She didn't always laugh, when she spoke with him, as her parents did. He resented his nickname, a plaything for grown-ups. He expected to make a poet's fame for Piet Perk. Meanwhile he inevitably developed into a schoolmaster, and a Socialist. His old father alternately pitied and abused, but never understood him. His mother understood, for she mended his socks when he came to her, and sent him Mynheer Melissant's fruit to the town. The children ran to him for everything ; he was their private possession ; his hands their instruments, his brain their mine. He did sums, wrote menus, composed Santa Claus rhymes. Everybody wanted him back, the moment he was away.

" Lord, to think that he likes ! " repeated Melissant,

whenever Victor Hugo, anxious to repay, demanded more work. Melissant himself gratefully remembered the moment when he had dropped all the worries of his harassing guardian, picked up what was left of his fortune, recovered what was left of his health, and built exactly the house he wanted in the neighbourhood he preferred. With resolute optimism he had called it "Sans-Souci."

The Melissant children did not "like." "All right," said their father. "Their mother never learnt anything and I—thank Heaven—have forgotten. And look what a charming woman their mother is."

"The less the girls learn the better; it spoils their figure so!" said the mother, half laughing. Melissant was very desirous his daughters should have good figures. Good everything. Oh yes, good morals, too.

But morality in women is not knowing that morality exists. Nobody talked of good or evil at Sans-Souci. Except to mix them up.

"Besides, how can you teach children what you don't know yourself?" Melissant took great pains to explain this fallacy to Eva's last resident governess, when the child was barely seven years old.

"Don't you see, if they steal, so do you? Nature has taught you."

"Me!" exclaimed Miss Thrupp, her long hand on her bosom, her thin nose high in air.

"Look at the birds! We all pick other people's fruit, whenever we get a chance."

"Me!" cried Miss Thrupp. "My poor father——"

"Would have given you better advice than I? I am sure of it. He was a clergyman. Clergymen always give excellent advice. I am sorry. Certainly Eva ought never to swallow more plums than she can digest. Perhaps nature will explain that to her, in time. Still, remember, her namesake had the pick of all the apples in the garden except one and yet she insisted on eating that one into the bargain. Now I never eat more than half an apple at a time. We

called the child Eva on purpose, that she might feel human, and not compelled to wear a halo, like the people called Marie. Oh yes, Mevrouw Melissant has a sort of halo, I feel sure." He nodded, pinched the culprit's ear very softly, and strolled away.

Miss Thrupp wrote home to her widowed mother, that she accepted the situation in Lower Tooting, however low the salary might be.

A mild lady was procured in her stead who disappeared after four. Melissant said he liked strangers at his meals, but henceforth the strangers must vary. So the children sat down, unguarded, to a late dinner with frequent guests, long before they could comprehend what was said around them. And after.

As soon as the day-governess had departed, the youthful Eva, with or without Fritz, rushed into the garden, shouting for Victor Hugo! He must swing her, or throw back her tennis balls, or answer her questions about birds, beasts and trees. One sporting accomplishment the scholar possessed. He could angle. The children went out with him long afternoons.

Consumed by his desire to repay, he begged Mynheer Melissant to let him teach the girls Dutch. "By all means," said their mother. "His 'Esau and Jacob' was beautiful. We only laughed at it because it was his." There was no unkindness in Mevrouw Melissant's laughter. She had sense enough to see her neighbours' failings, and sense enough to see them small. She liked this best of worlds ever since her widely indulgent stepmother had advised her not to heed her stupidly exacting governess. She always remembered that wonderfully pleasurable change of outlook. She now wanted everybody to have an equally good time. Most rarely did she ask anybody to leave off doing anything she disliked. She endured any discomfort of noise from her children, or annoyance from her neighbours. "Live and let live!" she said, even when the maids smashed her china. She possessed

a perfect genius for explaining away other people's sins.

She inquired about the Dutch lessons a few weeks after they had begun.

"Well, Eva?"

"Victor Hugo's been reading, mother, to me and Marthe."

"Did you like what he read?"

"I don't know, mother. I don't think I listened."

"I hope you pretended to?"

"Oh, rather! Hard!"

"That was kind. Did you tell him you enjoyed it?"

"Why, of course, mother! After he'd read all that time! He *would* have been sorry."

"I am glad my Eva remembered to consider other people's feelings. You must always be very kind to the poor fellow. Would you like a game of tennis?"

Eva was always ready for tennis, or billiards, or bridge, or anything else that calls for proficiency in play. Any game or any treat. Hadn't the boys let off fireworks on the lawn the night that cook got that wire from her brother to say he had gained a prize in the lottery? Had not father said a lottery prize was the honestest gain in the world?

"Your lottery's marriage, girls," he had said.

"Marriages are made in heaven," said the girls' mother.

"And exported immediately after," said Melissant.

"Don't talk of love-making to them, Lourens! They must catch the complaint unawares."

"No, it is hereditary. There is no case on record of anyone having fallen a victim to it, unless the parents had it, in some form, before."

"You will feel less humorous, when I tell you that the butcher has forgotten to send the cutlets. You will have no lunch."

"What does that signify? I will eat anything but tinned lobster."

He wandered off through his gardens. In their wealth of vegetation they contained neither flowers of incredible value nor fruit of inordinate size. Just as his beautiful house could show no treasures that were priceless or manifestly priced. "There's no slave like the slave of a fad," said Melissant. When his children picked orchids or broke vases, he courteously requested them not to do it again. They rarely did. "Life is an if," said Melissant. "The solution is, 'What does it signify?'"

Victor Hugo lifted two thin arms to the irresponsive stars. Meanwhile he turned his long vacations to account by striving to sow Socialist seed in the sandy soil. "Certainly," agreed Melissant, "I myself should be a Socialist, if I hadn't the means. All the same, Eva, I hope you understand?"

"I don't, father."

"Better still. But you must be gentle with Victor Hugo. I pity the poor chap from the bottom of my not very deep heart."

"Why—because he's ill?"

"Because he's a poet. A genuine small poet, I imagine, though I'm a very small judge. He will always believe in himself, and nobody else will ever believe in him. I think I would rather be a gardener, though I really don't know which is the more tantalising of the two trades."

"Poor fellow!" said Eva. "A poet! And he so plain!"

Thus it came about that when Victor Hugo had a headache the elder daughter of Sans-Souci hastened to the kitchen-garden to ask his father for a cabbage-leaf.

CHAPTER IV

A CABBAGE-LEAF is what you believe it to be. It has been a gilt-coach. It has been the cradle of the human race. It is a cure for the headache.

Victor Hugo sat with its green frill shading his pale face under his bowler hat.

"I can think of nothing," he said dejectedly. "No interest attaches to the fact that a man has been married twenty-one years."

"I disagree," said Eva.

"What is the interest, pray?"

"Me. I am nearly twenty. The fact is profoundly interesting."

"To you."

"You don't mean that. To all the people who love me. Certainly to my father and mother. Last year was the twentieth anniversary of the marriage. This year is the twentieth anniversary of the family."

"No, that would be on your birthday next month!"

"How absurd! My parents weren't married on my birthday."

"But don't you see——" began Victor Hugo, with explanatory finger.

"Oh, how tiresomely exact you are! I can't do sums like you. It must be very bad for your headache. Besides, it's too hot. And fifty people are coming in a few hours who expect to be amused."

"And I am expected to amuse them!" It was the cry of the harassed but not neglected genius, bitter-sweet.

"You needn't, unless you like, poor man. Only—one likes to fancy you like."

"Oh, I like. I like!" he said, hastily reminiscent of Melissant.

"Then I think you could easily be pretty about us. Some charade or scene—nothing elaborate—something we could learn this afternoon if we worked hard. You know just what there is upstairs in the way of costumes and theatre things. A room full!"

"I know," said the wretched poet.

"Why, you've done it a dozen times. It needn't be so very good."

"Oh, thank you!" The poet subsided: "There was always an à-propos."

She sat up on the bench and screamed at him. "There's us!—us!—us!"

"A charade!" he said scornfully. "Eva—Fritz—Marthe—Mom. And my whole: Melissant!"

"No," said Eva, shaking her head. "It's no use doing a stupid thing for my father."

"Nor for your mother. I suppose it has never occurred to you, Freule Eva, that your mother might possibly be the cleverer of the two?"

"They have never occurred to me," replied Eva indignantly. "They're both as clever as clever can be."

"I know I'm only a common person," responded the schoolmaster, rearranging the cabbage-leaf.

"That is a mean advantage," said the Freule Eva. "You take it too often. Now—honestly—don't you? And I'm too considerate. Now—honestly—ain't I? Well, what were you about to remark?"

"Your mother is always happy, and your father always thinks he is. That's why I consider your mother the cleverer of the two!" he explained with a rush.

"Then—poor Victor Hugo!—how dreadfully unclever you must be!"

"Because I am unhappy?"

"So you told me at Whitsuntide."

"I am unhappy still, I am proud to say. But I don't aspire to mere happiness. You are wrong, Freule Eva! We are clever according as we achieve what we

were intended for." He fixed-on his pot-hat and gazed determinedly at nothing.

"I don't understand," said Eva wistfully. But she picked and smelled a dark, strongly scented rose.

"Pray Heaven, you never may!" said the poet, hugely enjoying himself over his own peculiar pastime. "Your parents won't. Well, they're right. It's the cleverest thing in this world to be merely happy, and the unhappiest to be merely clever. That's clear! Be happy, then! I doubt whether you're clever enough to be happy right through."

"I am happy," said Eva.

"Stop in Paradise, then!" He started to his feet the cabbaged bowler fell among the rose-bushes; Eva returned it to him.

"Excuse me!" said the poet, wiping his forehead. "You see, I only came back yesterday from my drudgery in the slums. You don't know about slums. Or about drudgery. People born at Sans-Souci should never see the outside world! Or never come back!"

"What nonsense! I've travelled!"

"In a Sans-Souci coach. Like Catherine of Russia—wasn't it?—with Potemkin. Oh, I'll write something, never fear!"

"Victor Hugo!" opined Eva very decidedly, "you should leave off being a Socialist. It's that makes you unhappy, not being too clever. Father says if he was that sort of Socialist, he'd rather be Salvation Army."

"He couldn't stand the hymns," said Victor Hugo, suddenly calming down.

"That man yonder's going wrong! He'll pass us on his way to the house!"

Victor Hugo's eyes followed her outcry. A figure in brown country clothes—a gentleman, evidently—with a dark dog beside him, was coming up slowly through the rhododendrons. Victor Hugo had little love for too evident gentlemen and an acute dislike of all dogs.

The stranger halted, hesitated. It was manifest that

he strongly disapproved of trespassing. He stood in the sunlight, barely thirty yards off, tall, broad-shouldered, with easy bearing and uncertain resolve.

"Go to him at once!—tell him to come on now!" prompted Eva. The shy schoolmaster moved an ungainly foot.

The girl leaped lightly forward. She slipped on the narrow path; she righted herself against an overhanging acacia.

"You can pass here!" she gasped, "this'll take you to the house!"

"Oh, I hope you're not hurt? I came wrong!" replied the visitor.

"I am not hurt," she replied, vexed with herself. "I can't think how I could be——"—she had looked back—"Oh, poor thing!" she said. She pointed to a green smear across the gravel.

"What?"

"It's the caterpillar. I had been watching him. He started ten minutes ago."

"There isn't much left of him," said the stranger. Eva glanced aside at the man's countenance. The tinkle in his voice and the twinkle in his eye had appealed to her. She felt that Victor Hugo would not have twinkled over the caterpillar. Yet the new-comer's features, in repose, were sooner heavy than humorous; he was old; his age, most healthily worn, must have been about thirty-five.

The dog, advancing, smelt over the stain with an air of superhuman intelligence. He peered up into his master's face. "No," said the master to the dog.

"The rest's on my sole," said Eva turning back to the bench. "And his blood's on my head, for he came with the cabbage-leaf."

"Poor thing!" snorted Victor Hugo ambiguously. The stranger's gaze rested in charity on the poet's long face, and his bowler and its fringe.

"I forgave myself," explained Eva conscientiously, "because he was travelling to the rose-bushes. And I

thought probably dwarf-roses would be nicer than cabbage-leaves."

"You are sure that roses were made for caterpillars?" asked the visitor gravely.

"Hardly. But I don't see why *I* should spoil a caterpillar's good time."

"I'm afraid you don't recognise me. My name is Rutger Knoppe."

She smiled up at him. "I recognise you. But I wanted to talk about the caterpillar."

"It's so long since I was here last. My uncle sent me with a message."

"This kind of caterpillar doesn't eat rose-leaves," slipped-in the schoolmaster.

"Then you should have put him back on your cabbage-leaf," retorted Eva, with just the very faintest touch of temper. "Are you staying with your uncle, Mynheer Knoppe?"

"Yes. Over Sunday."

She looked straight at him and laughed aloud. "He has forgiven you, then! Oh, you see, we have no secrets in our neighbourhood. Everybody knows that old Baron Knoppe quarrels and makes peace with his half-a-dozen nephews, all round, once a year."

"There are not half-a-dozen," said Rutger Knoppe coldly. "And I am the only Knoppe amongst them. Yet he has taken four years to forgive me." His tone brightened. "But you're right; he had fallen out with me before. And may again."

Eva had stooped to the dog. "Don't!" said Rutger Knoppe.

"Would he bite? I love dogs. What's his name?"

"He wouldn't bite, but he isn't friendly. His name's Sherlock."

"Holmèss?" said the schoolmaster.

"Holmes. He's a police-dog. First prize," explained the owner proudly. All his effort couldn't keep the pride out of his calm voice.

Eva clapped her hands. The dog, a steel-grey Dutch Shepherd, with keen nose and beady eyes, winked patronisingly.

"Oh, how splendid!" she cried. "I never saw one before. The papers are full of them. You let them smell something, and they find out who did it!"

"Or they bite the wrong man," came, in tragic tones, from the bench.

Once more the visitor let his cool glance rest on the feeble (physically feeble) poet.

"That account was exaggerated," he said quietly. "The man didn't die."

A sardonic laugh broke from the bench.

"And the dog wasn't a police-dog," continued Knoppe to Eva. "I really went into that matter—accurately—because, you know, I cared."

"Father's lost his ring," replied Eva. "Would your dog find it?"

"Hardly," said Knoppe. All the same his tanned skin darkened faintly with expectation. "He'd find a cap or a handkerchief. A ring'd have no scent."

"The dog in the Slik murder found the wrong cap," remarked the bench.

"You seem to have made a very particular study of a very unusual subject," retorted the dog's owner, straight at the cabbage-fringe.

"Oh, no, but I read things. I read the papers."

"Mynheer Perk reads everything, knows everything: he's a schoolmaster," said Eva. She only meant a kindly elucidation where the sensitive poet felt a sneer.

"My father has come out on the terrace," said Eva. "Vous l'intriguez. Shall we go to him? He will be so pleased to see you again."

"Do let him find the ring," she said, indicating the solemnly contemplative dog, who marched beside them. "Without telling father."

"It isn't likely," said Knoppe, but he stopped and spoke to Sherlock, pointing. That canny individual

listened with only a slight tremor of the nostrils. Then demanded some further information, which he acknowledged with a flap of the ears.

"I must give your father my uncle's message," said Rutger Knoppe. "He is so sorry, but he cannot possibly come to-night: he has been called away on some dyke business. You know how——"

Eva turned on the steps. "Oh, that's too bad of him! Why, he's our chief—— Father, this is Mynheer Knoppe, you remember! He was here four years ago: he used to come and play tennis!"

"I remember perfectly," said Melissant prettily, with extended hand. His careful womenkind were well aware how little he remembered. His house stood open: all might pass in, provided they asked no more than he offered and passed out. As regards unpleasing social duties, he was blind and deaf. But then he was also—and that condones everything—dumb.

"My uncle feels awfully bad about it, but he really can't come," said the visitor, trying to be pretty also. "You know his devotion to public——"

"Oh, I know," easily admitted Lourens, withdrawing his fingers from Sherlock's investigating nose. "There's nothing in the world more lovely than public—what is the word? Eva, don't let Victor Hugo go: I want to ask him something important."

"But it's too bad," cried Eva. "The whole table's upset! We shall have to rearrange them all! And we can't, at this last moment, get another man."

"There must be lots of other men," objected the nephew, with bold apology.

"Not of the right kind!" protested Eva. "Oh, look here, supposing you come! Father, ask Mynheer Knoppe to join the party!" She grinned frantic intelligence, behind the stranger's broad back.

"We shall be delighted," said Melissant. "I hope this dog isn't hungry?"

"No doubt your hand smells good," said Sherlock's master as he led the canine inquirer away.

"Send me up Victor Hugo!" called Melissant. "There's a joke in the 'Fliegende Blätter' I cannot make head or tail of—he ought to know!"

"He couldn't possibly find a thing like that," pleaded Knoppe, alluding to the quadruped. "Not unless it were close by, and even then I hardly see how the scent——"

He stopped short by the rhododendron bushes; the dog stood still.

"Never mind: please don't trouble. He was a long way off, in the woods," apologised Eva.

Sherlock, however, ignoring their mystification, deliberately nosed his way through the border and behind the bushes. In an open space at the back he drew breath, by a bunch of stunted grass. The others followed, breathless. Not Victor Hugo, who rose, eager as ever to repay his patron a penny in the pound.

Eva and Knoppe found the police-dog standing by the ring. The girl bent forward. "Don't touch it!" cried Knoppe.

She started back, pale. Sherlock's master lifted the jewel—it shone a bright green.

"It's the ring, sure enough," breathed Eva, "but your dog's an uncanny dog."

He had been scrutinising the ring: he showed her a tiny speck, paste of some kind, within its circlet.

"Soap! That quite explains it," said Rutger Knoppe.

"Father uses a strong-smelling kind," said Eva. "Opoponax."

"Just so. Now it isn't really in any way remarkable. Of course he'd go straight to the same smell. It was close by."

"Yes," she admitted: she took leave of him and ran back to Victor Hugo.

"It's wonderful!" she cried. "How full the world is of wonders! All the same, I don't like that kind of dog!" She stood pensive.

" Now you've got your idea," she said to the poet. " Father's ring—the one mother gave him, because I was born. The children's ring, as they call it. The children's anniversary, as I told you. The dog went straight to the scent: isn't that amazing? Work it out ! "

" I am truly obliged," said the poet stiffly, among the roses. " Of course he'd go straight to the stinking smell."

CHAPTER V

Eva glanced round the dinner-table. "Your uncle has made us play 'General Post.'"

"I feel apologetic. Still your remark proves that you would not have sat next to him," replied Knoppe.

"I? Next to the great man of the neighbourhood? No, indeed. I hope you like our party?"

"I never in my life saw such roses," he said.

"No, but I mean the people. It is so long since you have been in these parts." She felt like a child poking at squibs with a match: she revelled in the feeling, amongst the stodgy company, the fourteen dull friends and Knoppe.

"I am a slow judge of strangers," came the damping reply. "I go out very little. My neighbourhood is a quiet one."

"You still play tennis? You must come to our big match to-morrow—the match of the year."

"I shall like it above all things. I am staying over Sunday."

"Yes; that's the joke, isn't it? Oh, of course we all know your uncle disgraced you because you *would* go to church. It was good of you," she laughed, with much self-restraint, for such youth and exuberance. "No, thank you; no more champagne."

"Too good to be true." He emptied his glass.

"Oh, no; we all admired you immensely. I remember what father said; I was a child."

"Pray, what did your father say?"

"He called you 'the Pious Knoppe.' And he said, when a Knoppe went to church, he thought it was because a woman dragged him there."

"George! He said that?"

"He meant marriage."

"So I understood. I hope he soon forgot me altogether."

"Oh, yes. But to a family like ours, which never goes to church on Sundays, you naturally seemed—a paragon."

"Whew!—that's worse than 'the Pious Knoppe.' As a mere matter of fact I dropped into that church from sheer curiosity. I had no idea that my uncle had quarrelled with the clergyman, and I wanted to see somebody there."

"O—oh! Was she very pretty?"

"I used to think so. Look here!"—he shrugged his shoulders. "I'm not a lady-killer, but I couldn't have you talking about paragons and piety. May we change the subject?"

"By all means. You needn't mind if I say stupid things. I've always seen heaps of people, but this is my first d-dignified dinner party."

"I trust you are enjoying it?"

"I am," she said. "Almost as much as the others upon the stairs." She glanced away; her right-hand neighbour spoke at once.

"How hot it has been," he said, impressively. He was a young man without eyebrows, without a forehead, without anything behind where the forehead might have been. She had to talk to this young man about the few hot Julys that he remembered and she had forgotten. Meanwhile she could realise that she wanted to talk to the other neighbour about his dog.

"You don't really like him," objected that neighbour.

"Well, one has to get accustomed to the idea of his being a 'mouchard.' One thinks of dogs as gentlemen," she admitted.

"In my quality as a burgomaster," he answered, dissatisfied, "I can't take such a disinterested view of the criminal class."

She laughed. Serious conversers looked round from the gloom of their discourse. "Oh, I mustn't laugh

like that at this party!" she said, abashed. "You had better discuss the criminal class with father. He says there's no such thing."

"Probably not, in his life."

"He always says we all skate on the same ice, and some few of us fall through. Don't you think that's clever?"

"Very clever. When I'm accused, I shall get your father to defend me."

"Oh, not unless you're guilty. He wouldn't think it any fun."

"You talk as if you would have liked me to do it, whatever it was."

"I should. I always like the real villain best. So does everybody, in this house, at any rate. He has the black hair, and the dark look, and the deep soul! When we come home from the play, we all praise the villain. Marthe and I want to marry him. Don't you agree?"

"All right," he said. "I agree. I mean just as much of it as you do."

Mevrouw Melissant rose. Eva rose also, feeling that somehow she hadn't had the best of it. She had spoken quite reasonably, yet her companion had set her right.

"Well," he said, "I only hope your first dinner-party hasn't been altogether a failure? I feel a bit guilty. Who ought to have taken you in? A younger man than I?"

"If you go fishing for compliments, then I shall do so also," replied his youthful companion. "Be careful! A lot depends upon your answer. Who do you think is the best dressed woman in the room?"

"Your mother," was his prompt reply.

"Right! I asked my other neighbour just now, and he said 'Me.' The silly! I've merely got a lovely frock. It came with mother's from Brussels."

"What important issue depended on my answer?" he questioned. They were passing through the hall

She laughed again, so gleefully that the fat back in front of her looked indignant reproach. " My opinion of your opinion," she answered. " Isn't that important? I was so afraid you'd say 'me'; my heart bumped. My other neighbour asked me if he hadn't the smartest waistcoat. I'm so glad you didn't ask me that."

"I haven't got a waistcoat," replied Rutger, indignantly. "I mean I've just got my evening clothes on, like everybody else."

"We are old friends, you know," said Eva. "I remember how good it was of you to teach me the American serve four years ago. You may have the compliment you fished for. If I had had my other neighbour on both sides of me, my first dinner-party would have been a dull one. Fancy that!"

"You don't like dulness?"

"No, indeed; we're never dull here. At least not more than once a year."

The whole company had come out at once on to the terrace and the lawn in the splendid and silvern evening. "They will seem less wearisome," said Mevrouw Melissant, "in the open and the half-light." The masses of foliage lay immovable. The air was drowsy with warmth and scent.

The servants brought cigars and liqueurs. And presently Eva disappeared.

Mynheer Melissant put down his coffee-cup. "I hope you like our little gathering," he said pleasantly, with a slight wave of his hand towards the leaden solemnities scattered under the awning and on the grass.

The similarity of the phrase struck Rutger Knoppe. Were father and daughter laughing at him, or at their other guests only? "Your ladies are charming," he said, on his defence.

"Quite so. I put a pretty girl beside you. On the other side, I mean. She hasn't an idea—not even of herself."

"She seemed kind," said Rutger.

"A great thing. Personally I hate cleverness; especially in a Baroness Borck."

"I am not a particularly good judge of cleverness," answered Rutger. His tone showed that he had at once taken up arms for a Baroness Borck.

Mynheer Melissant noticed this. He was not prepared to love a man whom he had nicknamed, from hearsay, "the Pious Knoppe." He disliked piety, in the young for its hypocrisy, in the old for its cowardice. But he had never yet been discourteous to anyone, within the precincts of Sans Souci.

"Few men are," he answered mildly, "or of anything at all. But few men have the sense to discover it. I have never formed a judgment, only prejudices. Judge not, that ye be not judged."

This quotation at this moment struck a Church-and-State man like Rutger Knoppe as being in quite execrable taste. His good host had no idea it was from the Bible.

"I have always felt for the 'greatest living authority,'" continued Melissant, making conversation. "Infallible to-day, and to-morrow some fluke—what?" He turned to answer a servant. "'Signor Lampridi? This is an unexpected pleasure! You see we have a small dinner-party, Signore!"

The humble Italian, who had come too early, because he was humble, bowed low. He had taught the Melissants the rudiments of his language and read more Dante with them than they cared to understand.

"So I was informed," he smiled, bowing with each word. "For this was I prepared. For this festa."

Melissant must make what sense he could of the reply. He led the Italian away from Rutger Knoppe, but he soon returned to the latter with a more puzzled countenance and a more attractive companion.

"Mevrouw van Rys tells me you have not the great pleasure of her acquaintance," he said. "I am glad I can do you such a good turn. Amuse him, Celia. However did you guess that we had such a nice party on?"

He could not await her reply, for a couple of new

arrivals were being led towards him. The verandah was filling rapidly. The stodgy diners began to assume attitudes.

Celia van Rys, small, exquisitely lovely, extremely *décolletée*, attacked Rutger at once. "You must be a connection of the Lorings: how does she get on with him, since that handsome officer went to the East?"

"He has forgiven her," said Rutger.

"What a man! Would you have done that?"

"I am quite unable to judge. I am unmarried."

"Oh, yes, you are unable to judge." She looked round. "I must ask somebody at once. Shall I introduce you to my husband?"

"Why not ask him?" suggested Rutger.

"Oh, I daren't. Supposing he said 'no'?"

There were now plenty of people to choose from, lightly laughing, smartly dressed people, most of them well known to the beauty of a beauty-loving neighbourhood. She dropped away from the silenced stranger, who stood wondering, as all the rest wondered, what it all meant. And while they wondered, lines of coloured lamps suddenly woke up behind the bushes; the doors fell open from the small drawing-room into the large one, cleared for dancing, ablaze with light. The music struck up a waltz; a couple of young officers led the van. In a few moments the whole big white-and-gold saloon was full of whirling. "Has our fly come?" demanded the black velvet notary's lady. Mynheer Melissant danced the second waltz with his wife.

"If you don't dance with me, I shall think you can't," said the daughter of the house to Knoppe. So he danced, not well. "What do you think now?" he asked. She forbore to tell him. "Stay on," she said, imperiously. "We are going to make a night of it. We can lend you a bicycle." He sent a message to his uncle's coachman not to wait. The dinner dignitaries departed, shaking hands, and heads. It was a good thing they did, for, in the small hours, after supper, came a comic cotillon, with absurd paper dresses, and

in the middle of the cotillon the little musical extravaganza of the Signorina Eva Melissant and Monsieur Victor Hugo.

In the exquisite summer midnight, blue and blossom-filled, under the silent stars, against the lantern-hung shrubbery, with the violins discoursing Wagner music out of sight, and the joyous company crowded on the terrace steps behind the chairs of "bride and bridegroom," in their setting of gaiety and loveliness the joint authors, not lacking in audacity, produced their parody of the Ring. Fritz-Siegfried, made up to look very much like Melissant, and in the usual Siegfried underclothing (of Melissant's), fought with a linen Monster-Mom for the treasure of the Nibelungs. The Monster shot forth squibs, and roared to accompanying music, through a megaphone. Marthe-Brünnhilde received the ring, in the accents—Marthe was an excellent mimic—of her mother, and whenever Victor Hugo's inspiration had given out, the whole company—performers and audience—sang "Hojoioho! Heijaha! Hahei; Hahei!" as if they had been on the stage at Baireuth. All the more so in the second scene, when Brünnhilde complained that, after a year of marriage, the ring had not brought her the promised riches, that, in fact, Siegfried-Melissant had deceived her. "Weia—Weia!"—and so on. Then suddenly the Rheintochter Eva appeared with the proper solution. Let them take from the Magic Ring a truer treasure than its sorrow-laden gold. Let it bring them the treasure of children, the hearts of offspring—she sang in true Wagner strain—loving, loyal, and leal. "Weialala! Weialala! Leia! Leia! Wallalala! Wa!" Woglinde and Wellgunde, on the terrace steps, in gauzy garments, "formed again," as the Wagner text-book says, "their swimmy dance." And the Rheintochter Eva drew the ring from Brünnhilde's willing finger and flung it with the cry, "*Zurück vom Ringe!*" into the Rhine-gravel at her father's feet.

He stooped to pick it up, amidst a final crash of

"Götterdämmerung." With growing anxiety he had followed the grotesque story. He held aloft the ring. Its emerald caught the light.

"Good God, my own ring!" he said. For a moment, at the chill blast, the uproar of laughter and singing froze around him. Then the whole hubbub bubbled up again. The hilarious applausive crowd swept back, with the excited children, to the dancing.

They were mad with a wild cotillon-figure—from the "room full of costumes upstairs"—in which red-tailed, tall-horned demons chose gauze-winged angels—it was three o'clock in the morning—the room was misty; the music was frantic; the dancers had grown reckless of all but the moment's exuberance—the door opened, and a spare upright figure stood, like a black lathe, on the threshold.

"Baron Knoppe!" gasped Melissant. He stopped his swift circling. He had on his red devil's cap and tail, like the rest.

He spun forward. "Have you come to fetch your nephew?" he said.

"No, indeed, I have come to fetch my horses," replied, in strident accents, the high-collared, horn-faced old man.

Rutger had come up, with Eva. Many of the dancers had stopped. They formed a delightful background of incongruity.

"I sent a message to the coachman not to wait," explained the nephew.

"You might have seen, sir, to its being delivered," retorted the uncle. "It was not." He looked round. "As I can understand." He bowed formally to Mevrouw Melissant—in angel's wings—and to his nephew. "I am going home," he said, "I don't want the devil at Randik. He may as well go to—the devil." Baron Knoppe walked down the entrance hall, out of sight.

"Then you'd better come to me," said Melissant.

"He's in a howling, stamping fury, really," said Rutger. "Just the sort of thing to drive him mad."

"You can sleep here and send over for your clothes."

"Yes. I'm afraid the poor old fellow's door's again closed to me."

"It's all my fault," said the angel Eva.

He looked at her. A blight had fallen on the merry-making. It was not long before Melissant led Rutger to a bedroom. "Good-night," said the weary host. "We shall all sleep till lunch-time. And this afternoon is the tennis tournament."

"It was too charmingly sweet of the children," said Mevrouw Melissant. "The dear, affectionate things."

Melissant drew off his emerald ring in silence. He went to the window and looked out. "The ring of Polycrates," he said, deep down under his breath. He laid the emerald upon his toilet-table.

CHAPTER VI

"HE has now stayed in this house four long days," said Mevrouw Melissant. "There really was no other reason for that." She sat down by her daughter's bedside, in the moonlight. The laces of her blue dressing-gown fell away from her rounded arm.

Eva lay back on the pillow, amidst the silken halo of her hair.

"At the tennis tournament last Wednesday," continued Mevrouw Melissant, "everybody could see what I saw."

"I saw nothing," replied Eva.

Mevrouw Melissant smiled. "That speaks volumes, if accurate. You did not notice that he paid you marked attentions?"

"Why, mother, he knew nobody but me!"

"You are quite mistaken. He knew several people, and I introduced him to some more. He begged me not to. He chose the moment when you left off playing."

"A coincidence."

"Granted. I love a coincidence, when it is well arranged. Like the coincidence of a vacant chair, next to your chair, by themselves."

Eva blushed. "This morning in the billiard-room——" she began.

"That day they played no more!" laughed Mevrouw Melissant. "The upshot of it all is that you can marry Rutger Knoppe, if you want to."

"Oh, mother, what a horrible, cruel thing to say!"

Mevrouw Melissant settled herself more comfortably on the edge of her daughter's bed.

"May we talk?" she asked. "Don't you mind,

dear? Seriously, just once in a way? I promise not to do it again."

Eva's eyelids fluttered. "Please!" she said.

"The great thing is to be sensible at once," explained the elder lady. "There's nothing remarkable in what I said just now. A pretty woman can mostly marry a man if she really wants to. But some girls walk all round a suitor, and then they walk away. If you don't care for Knoppe, I'll go to bed. But if you're beginning to consider him—am I wrong?—as a possible husband, don't examine him too closely! That's all I meant." Mevrouw Melissant smoothed the soft folds with a rhythmical cadence. "Unless you intend to examine him afterwards," she presently added. "In that case I give you up."

"Have you not examined father?" demanded Eva.

"Certainly not. I married him because I liked him, and there was no reason why I shouldn't. So now I love him. I am not a saint. Nor does he think me one, whatever he may say to others. Of course I am not a sinner: that would be too dreadfully uncomfortable. And your father is a very nice man."

"Life is so complicated!" said Eva, in a tone of discovery.

"Oh, my love, don't repeat such a stupid thing as that! For Heaven's sake, don't let's talk about life: that is so tiresome: let's just live it! Life isn't complicated a bit for women of our class, with health, unless we knit too many men into the pattern. Take my advice: simplify. You are young, but you know a lot of men. This house has always been full of them. But I've never come and talked to you before."

"Then why now?" stammered Eva.

"Because—he," replied her mother, without any stammer. "We like to call this house of ours a Paradise, Eva—it *is* delicious, isn't it? I've no patience with your namesake: I think the first woman was the stupidest that ever lived. Paradise was Paradise, because there was only one man in it. I believe

she wanted to get outside to see whether there were any others before she definitely married Adam. She should have known it was too late!" Mevrouw Melissant bent to kiss the face on the pillow. "Now, that's my one little bit of wisdom," she said. "I thought it out years ago, and I always intended to present it to my daughters. It was so extra stupid of the woman, because there *were* no other men outside! Of course, she had one great excuse, she hadn't chosen her Adam. If you're thinking of starting a Paradise—oh, Eva, take your chance of your Adam!"

She went to close the blind. "Moonlight's no good," she said. "It should be treated as purely decorative. And mark this: to-night'll be—what is the word?—my criterium. That's why I came up so late. If you lie awake and worry, my advice'll be, when the time comes—Refuse him. If you look quite fit at breakfast, you'll be all right. 'Dans le doute abstiens-toi.' But there's another proverb about too much doubt and paralysis. If there isn't, there ought to be. Make the best of your Adam, and your Paradise is secure. You're young, but I accepted mine when I was younger than you." She switched off the light at the door, as she went out. Her eyes were moist. She passed thoughtfully down the stairs.

Next morning, before the late breakfast, Eva had been out walking, bathing, bicycling: there was nothing to be said for certain, about a bad night or a good. Nor did Mevrouw Melissant again revert to the subject. It was not her custom to revert.

Besides, the glorious summer was too full of the hundred bright festivities that go to make the sum of holiday existence at Sans-Souci. People kept coming and going, with every-day picnics and excursions: a couple of jolly artist friends had taken lodgings in the village: Celia van Rys was rich in the brief companionship of a famous Russian dancer ("the daughter of a general"): the Slav's dancing was a sight all must

see, in the moonlight, on the lawn. The young people also danced daily, if less noticeably, at one house or another: the older people had *their* diversion: in the pauses of bridge-playing they bent close to discuss the embroglio of the Lorings. "For it appears that she won't hear of his pardon; and insists upon joining her officer in Java!" Mevrouw Melissant yawned and shuffled the cards. Lourens Melissant put in a kind word for this Eve who wouldn't stick to her Adam. With his hands in his pockets he whistled his calm way through his own green, serpentless Paradise.

And there was holiday-work for the children. Life isn't all play. Or rather a good deal of it now-a-days is that play which is more arduous than most work. The tennis-match had ended in the discomfiture of the local protagonists by champion players from Arnhem: a "revenge" tournament was to take place, six weeks hence—the defeated must school themselves, all through the hot mornings, for the struggle in the victor's arena. Eva and Fritz must play, play, play. Rutger Knoppe must come down and advise them, must serve by the hour, with that swift American swirl of his. Victor Hugo must sit, biting his nails, beyond reach.

Rutger Knoppe was still at Sans-Souci, for the doors of Randik remained closed to him. His religious uncle had kept up the sardonic joke about the Devil. The uncle said the Devil was very well where he was. The Devil agreed.

"I haven't played for four years: I don't play at home," said Rutger. "I haven't played since I played here." He felt unconsciously gratified at this reversion from near thirty-five to just thirty. The girl was charming. So simple and unaffected. Even more so than he remembered her. Above all, so young and so happy. When you're feeling a little older and staider, such a sense of youth, rejuvenescent, is too dangerous: the constant give and take of the ball soon bridged over a gulf.

Sunday came and went over tennis. Lourens

Melissant made an offer of the motor for church. "The servants'll know the hours of service," he said, without a touch of a sneer. Rutger declined. "Well," said Melissant, setting down his cup. "I admit it is the nicest way of riling your uncle. I don't take the motor out much, myself, on Sundays, and we've got a dinner-party anyhow, to-night." Rutger Knoppe grinned awkwardly. "I didn't go to rile him then," he said with emphasis. "I just went to please myself." "There's no accounting for tastes," answered Melissant. "Has the post not brought my 'Figaro' yet?"

Eva fetched it for him. He lit a cigarette.

"I'll come and watch you," he said, "working like galley-slaves." He nodded to Rutger, and he strolled off humming. "'Qu'allait-il faire dans cette galère?'" The air at Sans-Souci, this exuberant summer, was full of the bright voices of birds and young people. How sweet life was! And young life, shaping itself anew!—how fair it was! Presently he smiled, as he heard the tap of the balls.

But he didn't smile when, next day, he met Celia van Rys out riding, and she asked him whether Rutger Knoppe was his friend or the children's? He answered, rather huffily, that Knoppe was half-way between himself and his children, just as Celia was half-way between his children and Knoppe.

Eva's acknowledged bosom-friends of her own sex and age spoke with much less ambiguity, as they bicycled with her one morning to the river for a swim. Since the evening of the Ring these two young ladies styled each other Wellgunde and Woglinde, and, as they bathed in the Rhine with Flosshilde, they sang Weiala la Walla till they tired. The very young peasants who listened on the heights thought they were angels, and the older one who heard thought they were fools.

The real names of these Rhine-daughters were Cissie and Bessie. Cissie was the daughter of a magistrate: Bessie was the daughter of a banker. They had played with Eva, squabbled with Eva, learned odds and ends

with Eva, ever since they could remember Eva or themselves. They had both been confirmed with Eva.

"And the dear child took the business so much to heart," said her mother. "You would think it had never been done to anybody before. As if everybody wasn't confirmed, when the time comes, just as they're vaccinated. That's what Bessie and Cissie told her. I hope she won't make such a fuss about getting married."

"Or getting buried," said Melissant, who liked to play with death as with fire.

"Or getting buried. When you and I are old enough, Lourens, we sha'n't mind getting buried a bit."

Cissie and Bessie weren't old enough. Whatever that age may be. At present Bessie thought the object of woman was marriage. She didn't give a thought to what might be her end. Cissie, on the other hand, considered the wedded state but a possible accident in the life of the female worker. She was by no means like the wealthy Bessie, an only daughter. She had been to the Grammar School, and was now already studying for a lady-lawyer. Bessie believed in her father's money-bags. Cissie believed in her father's brains. Bessie believed in inheritance. Cissie believed in heredity. Both were fond of each other and of Eva.

"Is he still staying at Sans-Souci?" questioned Bessie. "Or is it true he has gone to the hotel?"

"Yes, he's gone to the hotel," answered Eva. "He'd been with us quite a time."

"The tennis!" remarked Cissie, endeavouring to dull her dark eyes.

"You won't be very rich," said Bessie, speaking frankly. "But perhaps you won't mind that as much as some people."

"Father says nobody should be allowed to marry till they're of age," remarked Cissie. "But we needn't

agree with him. If a girl wants to marry, Eva—why, let her!"

"The water was delicious," said Eva, drying herself. "I'm sorry we came out."

"You can't stay in for ever," objected Bessie. "I must say I like change."

"That's the worst of the marriage laws!" cried Cissie. They all laughed. "Father says they're going to alter them," added the future lawyer. "He's been writing about it in a legal Com—no, Symposium." She dropped her voice: "He's *for* divorce."

"There's always been divorce," said Eva, bending to her work. The three sat in a line under the awning, in the wooden enclosure above the stream.

"I mean, he's for extending. Another man was for restrictions. Father says, if they want to part, they must part."

"How about the poor children?" cried Eva. She was looking up into the sunlight and thinking how bright it was. Its pure sparkle sparkled purely in her own soul.

"Like the Lorings," said Bessie. She was florid, rather slow. Cissie was small and shrewd.

"I don't know rightly about the Lorings," complained Cissie. "I'm dying to. These cases are engrossing! Eva, your father does?"

"Father doesn't talk to me about them," replied Eva. "He always says he doesn't like funny sins that have occurred."

"What does he mean by that?" demanded Bessie, pausing, comb in air.

"He means that he prefers comic papers, and comic plays, of course!" cried Cissie. "I'm just the opposite. I can't stand a detective story because it's made up."

"Ah, well, we must find out about the Lorings," sighed Bessie. "The money's his. How about the settlements? My father always says heaps of people would unmarry, if it weren't for the money trouble."

"What people!" cried Eva. "Oh, I won't believe

it. People don't unmarry! And if they really wanted to, they wouldn't mind about the money-trouble!"

The other girls laughed aloud at her. Cissie more pleasantly than Bessie. "You're in love," they both said. Cissie continued: "So you're prejudiced."

"I'm not," said Eva passionately. "It doesn't. I know nothing about marriage. I don't want to. But I don't believe in divorce. Or in settlements. I mean, their counting. Money—pooh! I did hear father say one thing to mother about the Lorings. 'She tore his cheque across' said father, and mother——"

"Come, what did your mother say?" urged Cissie.

"Oh, mother said: 'Wicked people are always stupid,' but that's neither here nor there."

"Your mother was very right," said Bessie composedly. "Don't excite yourself, Eva. We're coming to your wedding, and not to your divorce."

Cissie threw one arm round Eva's neck. "I think he's splendid," she said. "If you don't hurry up, Bessie, we shall really start without you."

"Do," replied Bessie. "Then mother'll send the carriage for me next time."

CHAPTER VII

As they bicycled back in the glaring sun, by the gleaming river, Bessie-Woglinde, along the green dyke, looked down into the current. Occasionally they sang Weialala! Walla! when no one seemed near.

"Why do you peer into the water like that?" questioned Cissie.

"I was looking for the ring, O Wellgunde," said Bessie, "I believe in the ring. Incalculable wealth!"

"And a curse," remarked Cissie.

"Curses don't work now-a-days," affirmed the banker's daughter. "Big fortunes do."

"What would you do if you found the ring?" demanded Eva.

"Buy a King. Is there one to be had?"

"If you did, they'd make you left-handed, or whatever the right expression is," declared Cissie. "What'd *you* do, Eva?"

"I don't know. Try to exchange the treasure for some other, as we did in *our* version. I couldn't possibly spend more money than I've got."

"Oh, that's Sans-Souci all over. The golden mien," scoffed Bessie.

"The golden mean are the stingy rich," said Eva, but the little joke, though she had forgotten the fact, was her father's. He writhed (grinning) when the children repeated, in public, his silly jokes.

Bessie, who had not even heard the last remark, as she gazed intently into the water, stopped dead. Eva, swerving aside, ran down the bank, with a crash, fortunately on the landside.

"Oh, I thought I saw something glitter!" cried Bessie.

"Are you hurt, Eva? Not badly?" cried Cissie. In another moment both girls were down beside the wreck, with little bird-cries of pity and help.

"I'm not dead," said Eva, sitting up. "I hope my bicycle isn't. You'd better hurry along, Bessie, and get your mother to send your carriage *this* time. Not for me—for the bicycle. The pony-trap. Our motor's out."

"Are you hurt? Are you hurt?" repeated Cissie.

"Not to speak of. But look at the poor bike!" She laughed. They all laughed.

"But I daren't go alone: mother won't have it," protested Bessie, almost crying.

"You'll have to," argued Cissie. "It was really your fault, you know. Altogether. You can sing Weialala—loud, all the way,"

"I think you're very selfish," said Bessie, slowly departing. The other girls could hear her shrieking the beautiful music, in self-encouragement, and a high soprano, all the way, by the gleaming river, under the glaring sun.

Not half a mile off she happened on the intentionally fortuitous Rutger, with Sherlock; she advised him to continue along the straight dyke.

Wellgunde, by the wounded Flosshilde did all that a Rhine-daughter can. "Of course I wasn't going to leave you," she said. "I believe you *are* hurt."

"Not badly. And I didn't want to bother Bessie. Because, after all, it *was* her fault."

"Eva, *you* will find the ring, you deserve it," cried Cissie. "I hope he loves you! Oh, Eva, I love love!"

"What! you who have said dozens of times that a girl oughtn't to want to marry!"

"Not to want to want a husband!" She hugged her friend, fortunately on the left side. "Oh, Eva,

have you found the real ring? No, don't tell me till you want to. Perhaps you can't just yet. It's such a beautiful idea. The enclosing circle! The ring!"

"For the moment it has cost me a bicycle and a swollen arm," replied Eva, obliged to choose between banter and a burst of tears. "Curious that she, who has so much, should be the one to want more!"

"It's her father's trade, getting more dollars. Getting your dollars. Getting all dollars."

"He won't get mine!"

"Yes, he will. It's his trade." She jumped up. "I won't stay with you, if you talk Bessie's father under this immaculate sky. Look at the innocent cows! I'm ashamed of you." She climbed on to the dyke and gazed along the white road.

There, immediately, she caught at her bicycle and, to the deserted Flosshilde's amazement, pedalled off as fast as she could pedal. She ignored her bosom-friend's cries of apology and distress.

Sherlock ran down the slope and stood still, very close, with malevolent eye. "Are you hurt? What is wrong?" questioned Rutger, clearly outlined on the dyke. He was by her side: she told him her bicycle was broken. "I could have walked, I suppose, but it's too far and hot, and I'm shaken. And the machine's a wreck. My friend'll send me a trap."

"Why weren't you more careful?" he said impatiently. She did not resent his tone, nor did she reveal, as he did not ask, how the accident had occurred. She felt angry, and pleased, with Cissie Brent.

"I was never taught to be over-careful," she replied.

"It is a great mistake," he said, still half anxious, half annoyed. "Most accidents are preventible." He lapsed into gloomy contemplation of the smash.

Presently he explained: "Your friend gave me a big fright. She called out: 'She's badly hurt!'"

"She must have meant the machine." A machine,

intricate, delicate, hard—and easy—to manage, is feminine in the language he spoke.

"How did you meet Bessie? What were you doing on the dyke?"

"Looking out for you," he replied. "I knew you'd leave them at the corner."

"But it isn't our usual route: how did you know we'd come round here?" There was a new delight in these inquiries, a flash and flutter of the moth round the flame.

Rutger nodded towards Sherlock. She was disappointed: she had hoped for some subtler intuition. "That dog is uncanny," she said, in not too friendly a tone, again. Sherlock, recumbent, stared at her.

"He *is* clever," gladly assented the dog's master.

"Do you mean to say he can always tell where everybody is? Do you ask: 'Sherlock, where's Cissie Brent?' and he says: 'On the dyke.'"

"No, not Cissie Brent."

"Pray, why not? Who not? Criminals only?"

"We don't care," said Rutger gently, "to know the whereabouts of that nice girl, Cissie Brent."

"A very uncomfortable distinction," she said. He looked at her. "Do you really think so? He can follow your"—he was going to say "scent," but stopped in time—"footsteps, because I've taught him." He drew a scrap of lawn and lace from his breast-pocket. "I hope you haven't missed this?" He didn't believe she had missed it: he didn't believe the Melissants missed things. She had missed it, but she hadn't looked for it. She held out her left hand.

He quietly replaced the filmy thing in his pocket. "Good Heavens, I believe you *are* hurt!" he exclaimed. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"We both preferred it to be only the machine," she answered with a smile.

She had not thought his brown complexion could have turned so red. It is true the smile was accompanied by a gasp. She *had* injured herself somewhere in this stupid upset: the pain was increasing.

He lifted the hand she had withheld, resting it, with much precaution, on one of his. The wrist and lower arm were swollen. He touched them here and there.

"You can bear pain," he said. "Forgive me, if I stupidly thought all women cried out."

"Your experience must be smaller than I'd fancied," she said.

He let the challenge drop. All his interest seemed centred on the swelling he was handling with such care. Looking steadfastly down at it, he said: "You are sure you can bear a good deal?"

"I can't say. I have knocked myself and cut myself, and had mumps. Never tooth-ache. I've never felt what you would call pain."

"You must have fallen on your wrist. It is just a little dislocated. It's getting worse every minute. That means it'll be a long, slow, rather painless affair. If I set it right now, at once, that'll hurt—but the swelling'll go down."

"You are sure?"

He flashed up his eyes at her, straight. "If I doubted, would I try?"

"Do it," she said, in complete abandonment.

But he rebelled. "It isn't fair—it isn't fair," he said, "that it should be *me!*—to make you feel p—suffer for the first time, as you say. It isn't fair."

His words were calm, but she saw what the thought was costing him. For his sake as much as for her own she said quickly:

"I want to play tennis. I must. You know I must. Make haste!"

She closed her eyes: she left her small hand in both his, without shrinking; she just managed—every nerve tight-strung—not to shrink.

"A—ah!" she breathed.

"It is done," he said. "You heard it click? Now I must rub it at once—you don't mind? It won't be pleasant."

"Thanks for telling me." He began to massage softly: the dog watched.

"How did you learn all this?" she gasped.

"From an old sergeant in my regiment"—he knelt in the grass, rubbing—"who had served many years in Java. He had it from his native wife. They call it pidjit."

"Oh, is this pidjit?—of course everyone's heard of that! Can many soldiers do it?"

"Lots," he said modestly, rubbing away.

"I've often wondered about your being an officer: weren't you sorry to give it up?"

"No, I wasn't sorry. I wasn't sorry a bit. I was glad. I left off on purpose." His quick sentences, in their eager intonation, were manifestly a request to continue the subject she had thus unexpectedly started. "Of course I was sorry in a way," he continued, "sorry to leave the other fellows—and the men—and the work. But I wanted to go, all the same. I'm very glad you asked."

He rubbed on. The swelling barely subsided, yet—in spite of the torture—she felt he was doing her good. She lay on the sward: he knelt beside her. The air was soft and warm over the pastures. The cattle moved, noiseless, munching. The dog watched.

"I should like to tell you," he said.

"Why?" she murmured. She knew at once that she ought not to have said that, but her nerves were overstrung: she could hardly endure the strain and the pain.

"Why? Because I should like you to understand. Because there are things you ought to know about me. Oh, I don't want you to know everything: no man would. But I want you to know a lot."

"Ah!" she gasped. "No,—it's all right. You don't hurt me very much."

"I can't help it: I'm nearly through. I left the Hussars—I wonder whether I can tell you without its sounding silly. I want to. I thought I'd done enough

of that kind of work. You see, it all comes to nothing. It's only preparation. There's not going to be a war in my time, and if there was, of course I should join."

He pushed his thumbs down with a few final digs. "That's it—you see, of course I should join at once—and the rest is just empty routine. You're doing nothing that means anything; are you now?"—he went on appealingly. "I so want you to understand. I knew I should never see active service, and you've only one life, and I didn't want to retire, at sixty something, a paper Major-General, and feel I'd been rehearsing all my life, for a play that never comes off." He began stroking softly. "As you grow older, you don't even want it to come off," he said, stroking more softly still.

She was silent: a great repose came over her, a great tenderness, in the lull.

She could bear the silence no longer. She opened her eyes to the sunshine, on the greensward, in the heat.

"So you threw it up, and became a village burgomaster."

"There's heaps to do—if one likes, you know—among the people. And somehow, it looks more real than parade."

"I *don't* know. You see, I have never done anything for anybody. Not to speak of. It seems wonderful your being able to do this for me."

"Not so very wonderful. Lots of people in the country—the real country—can cure sprains and stop bleeding. It comes useful."

"And I don't think I quite understand," she said humbly, "about real life and parade. I should like to."

He left off rubbing, and with a certain satisfaction contemplated his handiwork. "I am older," he said. "There's no use ignoring that. You are young and very happy. And brave. One wonders: would you dare?—Look here, you must keep this arm still till the throb is gone, then use it. May I make you a sling?"

"With that shred of mine?" she answered laughing. She avoided his eyes. She knew that he was trying to look deep into hers. He could see the pulses at her neck as she turned away.

"I shall keep that," he said, "to run after you. Wherever you are."

He folded his own handkerchief: the dog watched.

"You are brave," he said: "I had no idea. Sensible. And brave. One wonders, would you dare?"

"I can see the dog-cart coming along the dyke," she replied. "A thousand thanks for mending my hand so well. I shall always remember——"

"That I was the first man to hurt you," he said. His tone stirred unknown depths of her being; she turned whiter than in the worst moment of her pain.

"And to find out how brave you are. And sensible. I had no idea. I saw how lovely——" He stopped blundering; he had taken her hand again, to place it in the sling. He held it.

"If I've mended it, mayn't I keep it?" he said.

She let the hand lie. So she "took her chance of her Adam."

CHAPTER VIII

A WEDDING is a fearsome feast. It seems amazing that any bachelor who has seen another chief performer will consent to take that place. Probably no man would, but that it is the pleasanter way of ending an engagement.

All Eva Melissant's numerous acquaintances warmly congratulated her to her face. All behind her back, said the bridegroom was not as young as he might be. But looked younger. This was self-evident, and it proves a great deal for Rutger Knoppe that they said nothing worse. On the whole the impression was excellent. The Melissants lived lavishly: there were four children. It was just as well that the eldest should marry early a man of sufficient means, approved character and good name. Fritz Melissant complained that Eva's rotten love-making had lost them the tennis-cup at Arnhem. Marthe said it wasn't her idea of love-making. "Too old-fashioned and dignified for *me*," said Marthe at sixteen. But she would have said it at twenty.

"Eva, what has he given you?" asked Bessie. "I saw in the paper that an American millionaire——"

Cissie interrupted her. "He's given her that bracelet. Oh, shut up about millionaires! A wedding isn't a lease!"

The head of the Knoppe family wrote his nephew a curt reply. "You have tastes in common," he wrote. He stated in public that the selection of this young lady, after what had occurred, was an insult to his all-important self. Rutger Knoppe felt much more sorry than hurt. It is difficult, in the big world, to realise how immense old Baron Knoppe was in that little great world of his own.

"Would you deprive him of his principal amusement?" said Lourens Melissant, "you are cruel. It would be undutiful to give him no cause for complaint."

"There's no danger of that," replied the speaker's future son-in-law. "None of us can please him for more than a few months at a stretch."

"He enjoys the one thing that makes me miserable —a grievance. Nature is truly wonderful in her adaptations for us all."

"I ought to be his heir," said Rutger suddenly, turning, cigar in hand, on the verandah.

"My dear Knoppe, don't let's think of that! Nothing destroys one's whole life like the expectation of an uncertain inheritance! I had an old aunt like that! I wrote her that if she left me her money I'd pass it on to a home for dogs. She hated dogs. After that I never gave her another thought." He poured himself out a glass of cognac. "She left me all her money."

"She was very unlike my uncle Knoppe."

Melissant laughed carelessly. "She had made her will, it seems, and didn't dare to make a fresh one. Some people are like that. What torments she must have endured!"

The two men sat smoking. "This is an excellent cigar," said Rutger.

"It is," admitted Melissant.

"You don't mind my asking what it costs you?"

"No, because I am unable to answer. I tell my tobacco-man to send me various kinds—every-day, after-lunch, after-dinner, dinner-party—and I pay the total. I don't *venture* to look at the items. I can't spoil a good cigar." Melissant raised his clear profile thoughtfully to the summer stars. "The two things worth living for! A kind word and a good cigar!"

Rutger smoked on in silence. His silence annoyed Melissant.

"Of course my tobacco-man is thoroughly reliable."

"Of course."

"It is much better to leave details to the persons

who understand them. I do the same with my wine-merchant. I don't care much about wine. You may praise the cognac; that'll please me. I shouldn't wonder if it was cheap."

"Fritz told me, of his own accord, it was '68."

"That was very bad form. You must excuse him: he is young."

"Your children are accustomed to every luxury, Melissant!"

"Oh, dear, no! Haven't you been to call on Bessie's parents?—Aansmeer, the banker? He's our living luxury, our Socialist sermon, our Christian reproach. We here at Sans-Souci are all right; we have only the necessaries. But then, you see, we toil not, neither do we spin. *He* spins, all day—spins webs. And toils."

"Do you remember what follows on your quotation?" suggested Knoppe.

"No. Now, look here, you mustn't worry! With what my lawyer tells you I can allow her, you expect to have a small motor for Eva, do you not?"

"Yes; I think we can manage that."

"And your uncle is absolutely free to do what he likes with all his money?"

"Absolutely."

"Then what's the use of bothering?" Melissant rose and stretched himself. "The evenings are already getting chilly. If I dared complain, it would be about the change of season, when everybody likes summer best."

"But everybody doesn't like summer best," said Mevrouw Melissant, busy with ten o'clock tea, indoors.

Melissant stared. "Don't they? Oh, you mean the skating? Of course I should want ice in summer. It's the very time when everybody wants ice."

"And the concerts, and the long winter evenings at home," persisted Mevrouw Melissant.

"You are right, quite right," said Melissant. "I have always felt we ought to be able to sit chatting in the garden and round the fire with a book at the same time.

Life is too short. Of course you're right. Always. Always remember to be right, Eva, when your husband says something with which you don't agree."

Eva laughed. For we always laugh at the idea of not agreeing, when we twiddle the engagement-ring, and the wedding-finger is still free.

"A penny for your thoughts, Knoppe!" said Melissant to the contemplative Rutger.

"I was thinking that I don't really like rum in my tea."

"Then why on earth didn't you say so? Not a small child in this house has ever swallowed anything it didn't like. *I* used to have filthy stuff every morning, for my health."

"It was a merciful Providence," remarked Mevrouw Melissant, pouring out her amber liquid, "that made Eva like cod-liver oil."

"But what were you *really* thinking, Rutger?" put in Eva.

"Are you a sorceress? I was really thinking that your father is the luckiest individual I ever saw or heard of."

"Were you?" cried Melissant. "No wonder you kept back the thought. Is that a pretty thing to say?"

"I have not your gift for saying pretty things: I don't lay claim to it for one moment," answered Rutger, gravely stirring his tea. He corrected himself. "It *is* a gift, Melissant. You mustn't be hard on those who don't possess it."

"There is the moon!" exclaimed Eva, moving quickly to the window. "Let's go and walk in the moonlight, Rutger! That seems quite the correct thing to do."

Mevrouw Melissant took her husband to task. "You'd have done much better to tell her she ought to listen to him," she said. "It's not like we two, who are very nearly the same age. Rutger's older—I don't know how to tell Eva that."

"Surely she knows it?"

"Well no, hardly. Not as I mean it. However, I've

talked to her once, and I can't talk again. She'd dread the sight of me, if I began perpetually preaching about marriage. We must all find out for ourselves: nobody ever preached to me."

"Your step-mother advised you to be good to me: you told me so yourself."

"Did she? I forget. And you see, what a mistake that was! I haven't helped you to correct any of your faults."

"You've never seen them."

Mevrouw Melissant laughed merrily. "Indeed I have! If I'd never seen any of your faults, and you'd never seen any of mine, how terribly we should have quarrelled."

"Knoppe has faults," said Melissant.

"He has. Don't teaze him: he doesn't like it. Lots of people haven't the sense to enjoy being teazed."

"Stupid people!"

"From our point of view. Don't you think, Lourens, that some people's stupidity consists in their having no 'esprit,' and some people's in their having too much?"

"Oh, I say, that's a facer! Are *we* going to begin quarrelling over Knoppe?"

"Don't be sinful, Lourens! Yes, I said 'sinful.'" Marie Melissant replaced a stopper. "But isn't it odd, the way such a new man creeps into the family, and suddenly he's there! Here are we, immensely interested in Rutger Knoppe, a stranger. He's over the wall before you are aware. It's a fresh beginning."

"You saw him coming?"

"Oh, I saw him coming, when he was over the wall. All the nineteen years of Eva's life he was coming up behind it."

"They are walking along in the full moonlight, arm-in-arm," reported Melissant.

His wife placed herself beside him. "Yes, that will be our rôle in future," she said. "To watch them walking in their own moonlight. May it always be arm-in-arm!"

"Not to watch," objected Melissant, speaking with energy. "To look! Occasionally. I entreat you, let us both agree not to watch."

She remained pensive for a long moment. Then she said decidedly: "You are wise, yet even you never said a wiser thing. In that mood we can face even the wedding festivities. How the other children will enjoy them!"

For a Dutch wedding lasts a full fortnight. And all the precedent—one might say 'prefatory'—weeks were full of festal commotion. The weather had never been more conventional since the meteorologists first took it in hand. The beautiful gardens of Sans-Souci, laid out so as to mask their limitations, were a labyrinth of autumn borders, high and low. The sun of that sun-filled year lingered among the over-hanging birches: the migratory finches twittered in flocks. And the bright pleasance seemed ever echoing to somebody's laughter: if two people, except the gardeners, had wandered into it, those two found cause for merriment somewhere in its laughter-loving glades.

"A wedding is even better than an anniversary," said the Melissant children. Presents of course poured in, and invitations. It was as if the whole neighbourhood wanted to give Eva a glowing good-bye! The two artists in the village stayed on to paint her portrait: they squabbled gloriously over the colour of her hair. She had to sit to both. Rutger objected to her sitting to either.

"It's our first difference of opinion," said Rutger.

"Don't rub it in," she replied. She was looking away, under all the Rudbeckias and pale-blue asters. She almost frowned.

"I don't like the way they talk! As if you were a model!"

"But they always talk like that. Of course they see tints and glints, and all that sort of thing."

"The pudding-faced man talked about the texture of your skin!" protested Knoppe.

"He said it was almost too diaphanous to paint," pleaded Eva.

"D —— him," answered Rutger, who was nervous.

"I like them to say my skin is diaphanous—the pink under the white—had you noticed it?"

"And the lanky man said your hair reminded him of profane love—did you like that too?"

"It's the great picture—in Rome, I believe. Never mind, they sha'n't paint me if you really object. It's rather a pity, because my parents were so anxious to have a portrait. We have never been parted before."

Rutger, who had been walking up and down, drew one of the golden balls towards him—which was absurd, for such smell as they possess isn't good.

"Then let them have it," he said at last. "But for Heaven's sake ask those fellows not to touch you again!"

She glanced round in amazement: her blood tingled. "I couldn't!" she exclaimed. "They would think me—you haven't seen much of art-people, Rutger?"

"No, they've never come my way."

"These are old friends. They're a little unconventional, but that's what father loves. He says he can't bother about art: all the same he loves artists. This house has always been full of painters and fiddlers and artificers, the whole tribe, as father says, of Jubal and Tubalcain."

"They were a disreputable lot," said Rutger, quickly. "Look at Lamech's confession to his wives."

"You know more about the Bible than I do," she replied, confused. "Did you learn all that as a child?"

"I did. My aunt insisted on my repeating all the patriarchs. All the Kings of Israel and Juda. And both the genealogies of Christ."

"And yet you are not an infidel!"

"I am not 'the pious Knoppe.' But I have forgiven my aunt."

She had come to him. She drew her arm through

his. "I think you are the pious Knoppe," she said, "or you wouldn't have forgiven her."

"I forgave her because she's sorry," he explained gaily. "It's easy enough then. She's quite changed."

"Do you only forgive people when they're sorry?" asked Rutger Knoppe's future wife.

"If you forgive them before, isn't it like asking them to do it again?"

"How cold the wind is!" she said. "I hadn't noticed." She shivered. "Let us go in!" She resolved to grow older very quickly. And never to feel afraid of him again.

CHAPTER IX

So they were married. The second ring was round her finger—the alliance, as it is called. She was bound.

Victor Hugo had written exquisite verses about the birdie escaped from the nest. Many people declared the verses truly touching, but when these people were informed that the writer was the Sans-Souci gardener's son, most of them left off feeling touched. Piet Perk himself thought the lines should have been a great deal finer. Which proves him to have been very much in love.

All his life he had been in love with Eva. Many years before she was born. As a small child he had loved just such a lady, the beautiful growth of his dreams. She had not come as a surprise, on her appearance at Sans-Souci: there had been no reason why she would grow up other than she did. He was perfectly well aware that the whole thing was an absurdity, a divine absurdity, one of those impalpable contrasts between the higher life and the daily round! Deep down in his hidden soul dwelt the inner fact of Victor Hugo. Piet Perk gave conscientious lessons to his City School class.

At Sans-Souci no one could have strayed within sight of the truth. To Eva such a discovery would have been impossible. Yet, all unbeknown to herself, she had lived in the atmosphere of this great adoration, as a hearthless chamber is warmed by a fire in the basement. In her fearless intercourse with the many young men of the neighbourhood, it had not yet occurred to her that the well-warmed chamber was not really hearthless, for it is only when the fire-brand enters that we look where

it must rest. She was married to Rutger Knoppe. She approved with a cheery gladness the flame burning brightly in a grate. "I shall miss you very much. Thanks again for those lovely verses," she said to Victor Hugo, just before the final shower of rice.

"I am happier than I should have thought possible," she wrote home from the Italian lakes. "How absurd it is to be happier, when you have always been as happy as can be! Tell Fritz I suppose it is because he isn't here to teaze me. No, don't tell him that: he might believe it! I am happier, because of the new friendship, the fresh interest, the future! I wonder what that'll be like; I haven't an idea. It feels like going fishing, with another Victor Hugo, in a back-water, all alive with novel fish! Poor Victor Hugo. I hope he misses me on Sundays, when he comes home."

Mevrouw Melissant read out half this letter to Victor Hugo: she felt that he must be very much flattered and pleased. And as she realised, up to a point, what the man had lost, she cautiously pushed forward Marthe to fill the vacant place. Marthe, however, was unsuited for the rôle of even an unconscious Egeria. The loveliest corners of the garden became trivial, when Marthe sat down among the flowers. For Marthe, unlike Eva, enjoyed life, because she wanted to do so, realised happiness as a means to its own end. She did things, persistently, because they were nice, which is so very different from finding things nice, when you do them. To Victor Hugo she was not a fount of inspiration, but a piece of ornamental water. He looked down to the bottom at once, and saw it was cement. He saw goldfish disporting themselves—no, goldfish never disport themselves. They simply glitter, and, when possible, eat. Victor Hugo detested goldfish.

But her parents tried to like Marthe as much as they had always liked Eva. They hung up the latter's two pictures, and often forgot about either child. There

were so many other things to remember,—whole lists of engagements, in gilt and white. Melissant had to discuss affairs with his opinionated factotum, and although the master had few opinions, still—a yawn—it really would often have been quicker to order the thing yourself! Also he must ride, motor and shoot, enjoy his orchids, find time to see his friends. Also, although this was a matter he kept well out of sight, he must look astutely after the considerable remains of his fortune. He fully realised his own axiom that all human felicity is dependent on health and wealth. It was many years since his health had needed care.

He loved his offspring. It amused him to think they should call their forbears "children": he smiled over that, as he paid their bills. Nature should have made the modern father no older than his youngest son. Fritz fortunately showed a lack of receptivity. Little Mom, much livelier, had greatly diverted his sire by pointing out, as an argument for more pocket-money, that a parent's duty demanded every sacrifice for the comfort of the children his selfishness had brought into the world. Eva had been indignant: Melissant remembered that with pleasure. The boy's mother had laughed. "It's disgraceful! But true!"

"Now, look at Eva and Mom!" says Melissant, "and then talk about influence, education! Nonsense! You can tend 'em, not mend 'em! Mark that!"

He took a touching leave of Eva, all the same. "You have had a good time with us?" he questioned, retaining her hand. "Haven't you, Kiddie? Say—won't you?—before going, that you've had a good time?"

"Supposing I said no?" she suggested, laughing through her bridal tears. "It would be the first sorrow you had caused me," returned Melissant.

"Sorrow?" she answered. "What's sorrow? You've not taught me the meaning of the word!"

CHAPTER X

WHEN Eva returned from her brief wedding-journey the autumn mists hung grey about her husband's home.

Rutger Knoppe was burgomaster of two small Overyssel villages, whose churches lay three miles apart. As the crow flies. In reality the distance was immeasurable, for Volda was Catholic and Skilda was Calvinist. Between the two churches stretched a wide flatness of arable land. There were few trees, and no ups and downs: the whole country was just arable land. Here and there a green cluster round a low-lying farm house. And straight lines of grey water, the boundary between farm and farm.

The house of the burgomaster was at Skilda. Want of choice had long rendered it a sort of official residence. It was an old house, fairly large, just good enough to keep the man who found it there from building another.

Eva had thought it charming, when she had first been to see it, motoring towards it in the summer sunshine, through broad seas of golden corn. And charming had been the old-world picture of the pale lady who glided forward to receive her, Rutger's aged grand-aunt, the Freule Imka Lexma, rigid in the silver radiance of her more than eighty healthful years. The Freule Imka had filled the atmosphere with sweet perfume of ancient courtesy. "Just like a Japanese vase, full of pot-pourri," said Eva. Rutger gratefully accepted this tribute; the slim Freule fortunately never heard it.

The Freule Imka Lexma, a Frisian by birth and upbringing, had spent the first fifty years of her life in the

much belauded seventeenth century. In a land of clay roads, dripping lamps and rare news. All those about her had spoken seventeenth century, dressed seventeenth century, thought seventeenth century. Only her cast-iron old father had drunk eighteenth century; that had been the family's one touch of modernity. He had lived, all his long life, beyond reach of the "stupid railway," in a great house, clay-surrounded; and the peasants who obsequiously passed along its wide front had to walk cap in hand all the way. His unmarried daughters lived under his wing (and his paw) till he died, with the exception of the Freule Imka who, at the unripe age of fifty-four, almost accidentally departed to spend a gay fortnight "in the city," with her brother's widowed daughter Knoppe and devotedly lingered on through the poor thing's sudden seizure and slow demise. "I remain with the child Rutger, who has asked me to," wrote the grand-aunt to her father. "Your Nobleness approves, do you not?" suggested the sister who disliked her. His Nobleness, quite drunk, said "Yes." He was in the habit of pointing out that he could go back upon his sober promises; but his drunken word was sacred, he said.

From this home of her own the Freule Imka thus passed to a home for five-year-old Rutger. Nearly thirty years elapsed before he came and told her he was going to marry. A great part of that period he had spent at the Military Academy and in garrison, but he had come back consistently to her expectant hearth in the small house at Slaapstad. From the first they had got on, growing, different, in a similar soil. She had allowed his small fortune to accumulate in the bank; she possessed enough for her single silk dress and simple fare. In her old age she developed a mania for tatting lace, and devised a new torture for her friends in the shape of a charity box full of high-priced unusable articles, perennially perambulated from house to house. At her old home there would have been no buyers. The idea of direct intercourse with the lower

classes would never have occurred to her parson, her father, or herself. " Sort seeks sort," said the Freule Imka. " May I send you my box ? "

Such was the Freule Imka Lexma, the tutelary female influence of Rutger Knoppe's sober youth. The early years stood rooted in seventeenth century Dutchdom : very slowly Slaapstad taught the Freule that even at Slaapstad the world had slightly moved. Slipped. She modified her odd ringlets and paid a call on a connection who had married an Israelite. The stay-at-home sisters cried that Imka had become a red-hot Radical ! Rutger appreciated the thaw, but the Kings of Israel—not a dogma, merely a custom—remained frozen into his soul.

" She left her happy home in Friesland," said the generous Rutger, " to comfort a little boy with a corpse in the next room. 'We won't talk of corpses,' she said. And she never did."

Rutger was wrong: the Freule's whole conversation was of her galvanised dead. But she was easy for the youngest male to get on with, because she had been taught never to criticise a live male to his face, unless he was manifestly her social inferior. The human race consisted of the few high and the many low. Of the high-born the men had a title to vice, because such was their nature : the women found scope for virtue alone. Other, lesser peculiarities were an interest, not a necessity. But the low-born of both sexes developed a multiplicity of good and evil qualities to which their attention must perpetually be directed, with a stress upon the evil, in church. To tell her this was her creed would have been to insult her.

" Of course I shall now leave the house," she said suddenly. She had avoided the subject till all rural formalities and festivities were over. She sat alone with the young wife. The room was low. The mist spread grey outside. " She is the soul of sacrifice," Rutger had said : but he too had avoided the subject. He knew she must go.

"Of course," said the Freule; she laid down her tatting and gazed at her new grand-niece.

"Oh, no!" answered Eva, in the voice which means "Oh, yes!" She had always expected the grand-aunt to withdraw presently to the other old ladies in Friesland: time enough when "presently" came.

"Certainly," said the Freule, smiling. "I have not spoken to Rutger; because, like you, he will say 'Oh, no,' but, unlike you, *he* will mean 'Oh, yes.' He will see, with his clear perception, that I must go. I can quite comprehend that you, my dear, in your consciousness of inexperience, would prefer me to remain. But it must not be!" The Freule shook her head. "We must not be selfish; we must think of Rutger." She sat upright in her black dress—stuff before, silk after midday—with her monstrous hair-brooch, her silver side-curls and her cap.

"I *am* inexperienced!" reflected Eva aloud. It was a new thought. Inexperienced about what?

"My nephew must take his chance, my dear. Middle-aged bachelors who are lucky enough to bring home lovely young brides must take their chance."

"Chance of what?" asked Eva anxiously. She picked herself up in the easy chair, in which, like all Melissants, she had lolled. She added in haste: "His servants are going to remain. He says they are excellent."

"Oh, the servants! I didn't mean those. Servants are bad anyhow now-a-days: I don't advise you to trouble much about *them*," said the Freule sagely. "I meant conduct generally, in your new surroundings. However, he is accustomed, of course, to have things nice without noticing. Like all men, he won't notice as long as things are nice."

"He says he likes roughing it. He must have had some experience."

"As what? As a cavalry officer? My dear, when he asks you to entreat me to stay, remember to be quite unselfish, and firmly say no!"

"What a beautiful brooch that is, Aunt Imka! Is it very ancient?"

"Yes, my dear, it is seventeenth century. It is rather large for modern taste. The centre-piece represents my grandmother's tomb, done in her own beautiful hair. She had it with *her* grandmother's, but I grieve to say that crumbled away. I intend to leave it to you for your grandchildren when this crumbles."

"I'm so sorry: I haven't got any of my grandmother's hair!" humbly submitted Eva.

"They can have yours. It isn't the particular hair so much as the family memento. These hair-tombs have gone out of fashion. Now-a-days people avoid the grave side of life. I notice that you turn away from it. In my youth nobody objected to living or dying. Now, about my going——" She paused.

"Yes," said Eva, and rose to draw up the blind. "How dark it is!"

"I didn't notice. But these old-fashioned blinds won't stand being pulled up quite so sharp or so high." Eva tried to let the thing down; it had stuck.

"Do you not think, dear aunt, it would be easier for me if you discussed the matter with Rutger?"

"My dear, what a modern view! Easier? Now that would never have occurred to me. In my youth we never did anything because it was easier. And what do you think might have happened, had I spoken to Rutger too soon?"

"I really can't guess." Eva felt in a new world of reticence, like bumping about a room in the dark. For the first time in her life it seemed to matter, in ordinary familiar talk, what she said.

"He would have been quite capable of breaking off his engagement," said the Freule, nodding and tatting.

"Oh?" cried Eva, large-eyed.

"Why not? He believes that he owes me a huge debt. Men like Rutger pay their debts with their blood."

"Fine!" said Eva.

"No, absurd! For women were created to look after men."

"I am so glad you admire Rutger," cried Eva.

The Freule smiled to her, good-naturedly. She had never hoped for a grand-niece worthy of Knoppe.

"You were very happy fifty years ago in Friesland?" said Eva.

The old Freule looked out of the window into the mist. "Quite happy enough," she said shortly.

"You must stay here! You must stay with us!" cried Eva.

"Indeed not! I know better what I owe to my poor Rutger. *You* must be mistress here now. But I will not desert you, child. I feel for you. I will help you. I shall ask Rutger to build a little house for me over the way."

"Oh!" said Eva again.

"You have an odd way of uttering that little cry, Eva! Some people might be in doubt whether you were pained or pleased. At least, when there was cause for doubt. Don't thank me! I have always told Rutger not to thank me. But you might kiss me, as he has done on great occasions, once or twice. I dislike displays of emotion, but this is a very solemn moment. I have been preparing for it all these months. Last night I wrote to my old friends at Slaapstad. I shall never go back!"

Eva kissed the grand-aunt, rigid in the high-backed chair. It was a kiss of real affection. "You kiss well," said the Freule Imka. "I like a woman who kisses seldom and kisses well. So, I should imagine, does Rutger. We have much in common. Neither of us appreciates effusion." She took up her tatting. "I am old," she said, "but my father lived to be well over ninety. And my grand-aunt died at ninety-nine. Now you must go and explain to Rutger; and remember he is a Knoppe!"

"Why shouldn't he be?" thought Eva, as she went

to her husband's room. Its ceiling was low and grey with much smoking. The mist fell grey outside.

"Well, what have you been doing with yourself?" he exclaimed joyously. "Not too much house-keeping, I hope? I don't care what I eat."

"As long as it tastes good," she answered, smiling. She stood behind his chair. "Rutger, Aunt Imka is going to leave this house. She wants me to tell you."

He frowned. "She started the subject!"

"Of course," she said, pained.

"Naturally. I beg your pardon. I was startled. You see, I owe her a huge debt."

"She was very happy in Friesland?"

"Very happy. My great-grandfather lived to be ninety-nine."

"Wasn't that the great-grand-aunt?"

"George! you are right. The Lexmas are a wonderful family. Aunt Imka has heaps of good stories: you must get her to tell you some! Before she goes to Slaapstad."

"She intends to stay in Skilda. She wants you to build her a house." Eva waited to banish the ripple of vexed merriment from her voice. "She is going to help me."

Rutger sat playing with a paper-cutter. Eva had given him an ivory tusk marked "Semper Fidelis," the motto of the Knoppes.

"Dearest, she must do as she pleases. You feel that?"

"Quite. She gave up Slaapstad to come here with you."

"How good of you to see that!"

"And she gives it up now to stay with me!"

"She would never consider herself. If she thought she was staying for her own sake, she would take the next train!"

"Father says it is so nice to feel unselfish," remarked Eva dreamily. "It enables you to do as you like."

Rutger glanced up at her quickly, over his head. Her eyes were quite grave.

"You didn't think I was sweet-tempered?" she pleaded. "Or particularly unselfish? I hope not?"

"I don't expect you to do as my Aunt Imka likes, more than you like," he answered, also gravely. "Shall I go to her now? What do you think, dear? Shall I ask her if I may build her, as she suggests, a little house of her own?"

"Don't make it uglier than we can help, Rutger! Let's build her an English cottage. That'd be rather fun!"

"She will prefer an ugly house," said Rutger, going off. He found the old lady in her straight chair, tatting.

"You will stay with us—stay at Skilda," he said. "Eva hopes you will."

She gave him her stately hand. "I will stay with you," she said, "for—your sakes. I am glad our dear Eva understands."

Eva stood gazing into the grey autumn mist. Out in the garden the dog Sherlock stood gazing at her.

She took no notice of Sherlock. "The mist is quite beautiful," she said.

CHAPTER XI

Two days later the forlornest hut of the two parishes was aware that the aged lady at the burgomaster's had been turned out of the house by his young wife.

The two villages felt no real interest in the Freule, for they knew that she felt no interest in them. They disliked and respected her for her proudly indifferent visage in church. They gazed after her carriage, doubtful if she had dropped her firm chin to their humble salute. "She thinks less of a poor man," said the villages, "than a greengrocer does of a rotten cabbage!" An exaggeration, for she tatted.

She was old: she was venerable: she was an aristocrat. Immediately the villages, forgetful of injuries, deplored her mischance. Skilda spoke up in workshop and parlour. It opined that her middle-aged nephew should have waited to marry till she was dead. Thereupon Catholic Volda declared, on the whole, for the wife. Rumours of this gossip reached Rutger. He laughingly told Eva, that the Catholic population had expressed joy at her arrival. "Why?" asked Eva, pleased. "I couldn't tell."

He did not inform her that long custom prescribed such a clash of opinion in the two communes. It was almost impossible to suit both.

The Catholic parish of Volda, a bleak backwater by the stream of progress, had lain quiet for more than a generation under the rule of its benevolent priest. Father Bredo—Dutch Catholics say "pastor" and "Sir uncle"—Father Bredo climbing very slowly in this dim corner had nearly reached "the sign-post marked LXX, pointing home." So said his ascetic nephew, the Franciscan, when that nephew came to preach.

"There's another just beyond," the uncle answered, smiling, "marked LXXX, which many have reached who climbed so quietly as I." "What?" cried the young zealot. "Are you not eager to drink of the wine of the Kingdom?" The old man nodded. "Good wine'll keep," he said.

This old man loved his parishioners, but, above all, his parish church. All the interests of his long life had clustered, like ivy, around it. He had been born at Volda, officiating as an acolyte: he had returned to the place as soon as practicable, praying for permission to remain.

His superiors understood that it was the sanctuary which attracted him, no personal tie. He had taken the half-ruined building as he found it and spent every penny of his private means on its gradual restoration. Such was his unspecified contract with his bishop. He had grown to be an acknowledged authority on mediæval architecture, wood-carving, stained-glass—but only because these subjects were connected with his church. He lived in this continuous development of the knowledge he needed, doing his undeniable duty by his flock. He taught them Authority. "Do as you're told!" He did as his superiors told him. In all matters of dogma Authority, throughout the nineteen centuries, had known what was right. In matters of church decoration Father Bredo knew.

"But my wiser friends avoid the subject," he said. He sat paying his state-call to the burgomaster's new lady at Skilda. In a corner of the big dark drawing-room, full of yellow satin upholstery and ebony flourishes. The room was cold: a damp film crept about in it round the darkling windows. "Would you very kindly ring?" said Eva. She wondered, shivering: was that proper? The old-fashioned bell-rope hung in a far-distant corner. Eva had never spoken to one of these oddly garbed creatures, half man, half woman, before.

"Let *me* put some coals on," said the Father

benevolently. He did so with a neat decidedness that suited his long sheeny cloth and shiny buckles. He was square, stalwart, a bulwark: his cropped head and carved features did not indicate superfluous benevolence. He sat there, an ecclesiastical certainty, a manly churchman, health-breathing and hale. "I am seventy," he said. "I am young. My church is seven hundred."

"Beware of pulling out the plug!" said the Father. "I run on, and I never run dry."

"But I like people to talk about what interests them," said Eva. That had been the single conversation-lesson of her youth: she intended to work it in her official capacity, for all it was worth.

"Some day your Nobleness will do me the honour to visit it: then I will talk till you beg me to stop. It must be seen. Here in your drawing-room"—he glanced round—"I cannot." He remembered the man born in a dungeon, who asked about the Sun.

She had followed his glance. "Good!" she said. "We must fix a day next week." A thing of beauty! In this neighbourhood! "Yes," she said, warming by the chill fire-place. "An early day next week."

The flicker of surprise flashed away from the Father's countenance, as the burgomaster hurried in.

"I have arranged a show in it for the children. A Santa Claus," said Father Bredo. Eva, in her pretty silks and laces, soared aloft, as it were, out of her big yellow chair and her listlessness at once.

"A show!" she cried, her eyes beaming. "Oh, how splendid! Do tell me about it! Like the Manger one sees abroad! But a Santa Claus! With the white mule and the black servant? We must come!"

"A Santa Claus for his festival, the 6th! We shall have the Manger later on, but I am rather tired of that. And I've found in some old parchments, that we had a Children's Play of St. Nicholas in the good old time of the miracle plays. I can't have that now—more's the pity. But I've built up the little group in the

chapel of the saint." The Father tried to check his enthusiasm.

Rutger tried to check his wife's. "Your church is dedicated to St. Nicholas?" he asked bluntly.

"It was up to 1630. I've been trying in vain"—the Father's tone lost its careful neutrality—"to get that matter set right."

"The Dominé of Skilda and his wife have announced their visit," replied Rutger. "You don't mind meeting the Protestant minister? I see them coming up the road." The burgomaster stood by one of the long windows. The straight line of black poplars stretched away into the sinking vapours. In the bleak blank of the distance hid the small village somewhere amongst the loneliness and the damp.

"It will interest me—with your permission," smiled the priest. "I have heard much of this young pastor: I am told he also has a fad."

"Of which he is nowise afraid to speak?" suggested Eva. Her eager thoughts were with the Volda works of art, the picture-group! They reverted to last Sunday's long sitting in the white-washed Calvinist barn. She must attend church henceforth in a state-pew with "the pious Knoppe." All through the droning discourse the congregation had stared at her.

"Afraid? He's afraid to miss an opportunity!" cried Rutger. "An opportunity nobody saw but himself! His name's Solomon"—he turned from the window—"Did you hear why? No? There's just time to tell you. His father seems to have been one of those good-natured chaps that are always having a fine splash in hot-water! Tastes differ. A bad man of business and not a good husband. You know the kind?"

"I think so," said the confessor of Volda.

"Just about when the Dominé was born, the wife seems to have had extra cause to complain. And to have done so till the husband ran out of the room.

"Where are you going, you big fool?" she says. "To give in the child's name," he says. "Remember it's 'Jules,' she says. Off he goes." Rutger squeaked and grunted the two voices: he liked a funny story and told it well. But already the door-bell rang.

"When he came back, the wife forgave him. 'Kiss little Jules,' she says. 'Solomon!' says he. 'Solo—?' 'I've writ him down Solomon. The only god-father that did what he liked with women and died the wisest of men'!"

"And the most disillusioned!" said the Father.

"Doesn't that go without saying? But isn't the experience worth the price? By George, he had a thousand wives!" Rutger went forward to welcome the new arrivals. He noticed, with astonishment, a sudden cloud on Eva's face: he remembered, with bewilderment, comic papers lying loose in the billiard-room of Sans-Souci.

But the Protestant parson's wife of Skilda, diminutive and demonstrative, was already remarking that the weather had turned wet, and the Protestant parson had already stumbled over a stool.

Dominé Solomon Dickert could never have been called "Jules." His appearance suggested an under-sized Assur-Bani-Pal, a keen death's-head with a ringleted beard, and his college friends had already dubbed him "the Rabbi." He resolutely made himself up for Assyriology, aided by an aroma of ill-health and midnight oil. Compelled, through poverty, to accept a rural parish, he had carried to it a simpering little city girl who had cunningly asked about Amurabi; and settled himself to such research as might soonest obtain a professorship. He knew few of his parish-ioners by sight.

Father Bredo towered over this Liliputian pair. Mevrouw Dickert, clothed in richly broidered purple, sank down with a gasp on one of the yellow settees. "Oh, Mevrouw!" she breathed, "how you must miss the pavements!"

"We live"—Eva corrected herself—"lived near the town, not in it. I am accustomed to tramping in outrageous boots!"

"I can't wear them: I have such delicate feet!" said Mevrouw Dickert, and stuck forward two neat little, piteously bespattered shoes. She hoped the Papist would observe how very shapely they were. He did.

"Oh, the dirt of these roads!" sighed Mevrouw Dickert.

"My dear," remarked the Dominé, desperately prompted by self-consciousness to hazard something clever. "You are right. The roads should be clean. Dirt is matter out of place."

The burgomaster gulped down a cry of offended exculpation. The company sat, on the yellow settees, round a widening chasm of silence. A thing impossible at Sans-Souci, where Melissant would have filled the chasm before it had been formed.

The Father leaped into it. "As doubt is intellect out of place!" The chasm became a crater.

"I disagree! Utterly! Entirely! Altogether!" erupted the little Dominé. "Sir, if I didn't disagree utterly, I wouldn't be here!" He jerked up and down, as if shot by a spring. "All knowledge is analysed doubt, sir! The intellect——"

"Solomon!" said Mevrouw Dickert. The priest apologised. Eva, enjoying her tragi-comedy, almost regretted the prescribed entrance of wine and cake, at the absurd hour of three!

"Yes, this part of the country is new to me," she answered the ruffled Dominé, "I find it exceedingly interesting. There is so much that is—now what will you take?"

"Curaçao for me, please: I have *such* a sweet tooth!" giggled Mevrouw Dickert, displaying a dozen pearls in a rosebud. "And *may* I have a piece of Santa Claus cake, burgomaster? Thanks. I love Santa Claus! Next week! With all the goodies!" She (gently) clapped her gloved hands; not so much from sheer silliness as from a desire to appear at her ease.

Eva handed her the dish and told about the Father's group in the church at Volda. "The good bishop with his servant—from Spain, was he not?"

"Well, he really lived in Asia Minor," said the priest. "Not that it matters to those who don't know him as a saint."

"As long as the children's cakes are Dutch," said Rutger.

"The children would have had their cakes, saint or no saint," piped the smarting Dominé. "The cakes and the children's friend are much older than any bishop. Children's patrons and children's cakes are as old as the human child. A recently deciphered tablet of the year four thousand and thirty-five——"

"Before Christ," explained the lady, setting down her empty glass.

"Has given us a Babylonian Chrismal Book——"

"Christmas Book," emphasised Mevrouw Dickert, and nodded her purple-plumed head.

The Rabbi testily turned his back on her. "Or Register, which proves that the infant was anointed at birth and that buns were distributed according to its social rank." He gazed triumphantly at the Father, whose shapely fingers were ticking his—the Father's—substantial thighs.

"Extraordinary!" said Father Bredo.

"You have heard, Mevrouw, of Babel and Bible?" continued the Dominé, with enthusiasm.

"Yes, certainly: one's in the other," replied Eva, glad of a sure footing at last.

"H'm! I was alluding to the great modern controversy which has shaken the religious world to its roots. This tablet has at last thrown much needed light on the children's feast of unleavened cakes, *re*-instituted by Amurabi—you have heard of Amurabi, of course?"—he appealed to Knoppe. He was enjoying himself immensely, more than Eva!

"Am—your—rabbi?" Rutger felt his way in dim dread of some allusion to the man's nickname.

Fortunately the Freule Imka, tired of waiting for the priest to go, sailed in to see the pastor. "I must help our dear Eva," she thought. "What were you saying about rabbis, Rutger?" she asked graciously. "Telling your funny tale about the Frankfurt Rabbi and his present of wine?"

"This Rabbi is a great deal older than any Jew Rabbi," persisted the Dominé, "and his religion is a great deal older than any Jew religion!"

"Solomon!" stamped his wife. "Stop talking about religions. It's very rude, when you know the Father's Jew religion isn't the same as yours!"

The priest rose. He felt that the Freule Imka had searched long enough for his cloven foot.

"We haven't fixed a day yet!" said Eva.

The priest bowed. "Mynheer will write. I await his orders. Yours. You know the old adage. 'The commune is ruled by the burgomaster; the burgomaster is ruled by his wife.'"

"It doesn't sound old: it sounds new!" said the Freule.

"It is seventeenth century," said the priest.

"All Papists lie," reflected the rabid Freule, "they can't speak the truth, just as I can't speak Greek."

"You approve of the sentiment?" questioned Eva, shaking hands.

"Yes, for I am not married," said the Father, pleased with his exit.

"Solomon," remarked Mevrouw Dickert, "I wish I had married a priest."

"Better not: they know too much about women," said the Freule, falling, the moment the wolf was gone, on her shepherd.

"The women I have studied are four thousand years old!" retorted the angry Dominé. Why was he wasting his costly time on this visit? "And I haven't had the confessional to help me for the women I see around me to-day!"

"Mynheer the Notary!" announced the servant.

The local doctor and his wife followed almost immediately. Everybody was trimmed up, and had brought his best clothes and his best manners. The Dominé had no better to bring.

Presently the whole sofa—the seat of honour—was occupied by the widowed Baroness Bigi of Tietstjumperadeel. This lady had recently come to live in the neighbourhood with her five middle-aged daughters. She intended to be the supreme social tribunal of the province and never to allow a plea of not guilty. For Eva she was as much a novel type of the human as any parson or priest.

"You are going to leave us, my dear?" said the Baroness to the Freüle Lexma, the only woman in the room for whom she could feel some sort of consideration. The five daughters tried, whilst saying something, to listen to mamma.

"No, I am going to move over yonder, my dear," said the Freule, nodding. "We are going to build a little house."

"Then that is true? I couldn't believe it!" said the Baroness, "at your age, my dear!"

"True, but this part is so salubrious. I suppose that is why you moved into it, my dear? Have you finished all your alterations at last?"

"My daughters will live in the house, when I am gone," said the Baroness Bigi.

"Yes, they will need room," said the Freule, mustering the five.

"But it's quite like you to remain near," admitted the Dowager, darting eagle glances from the sofa. "She looks very young. And too pretty. Half his age, I am told?"

"Not quite, I think," said the Freule Imka. "But I'm stupid at sums, though I daresay there are folks still stupider. My dear, you should have been earlier: we have just had the Catholic Priest."

"I have no wish to meet him," said the Dowager, "unless I felt sure I should convert him. And I do not."

CHAPTER XII

"We can't go, because we cannot," said Rutger. "Be sure I should never have referred to the subject but for this!" He flung down the letter on the table. He laid his hand on the dog's head. "Sherlock," he said, "you're not a patch on the old Baroness for ferreting out other people's affairs."

"Am I to be rude to the poor priest, because that wretched old woman boasts an ancestor who was burnt at the stake?" said Eva. Her eyes flashed. "If he was to be burnt anyhow, I wish he'd been burnt before he was her ancestor!" she said.

"No, my dear child!"—she wished he wouldn't call her that quite so persistently. "We can't go in any case, just yet, to visit the Catholic church at Volda. All in good time!"

"But why not?" she persisted. She moved into the light—how dark was this room of his! "I am not a child!"—she started, afraid he might feel a quite unintentional allusion—"I mean, at least I might be allowed to understand, if I am to be the burgomaster's wife!"

He caught at her hand. "You are the burgomaster's wife, for ever and always! That's just it, darling. You're become, in our own small way, an official personage. And when you met that girl Bigi last night and told her you were going to inspect Father Brédo's Saint Nicholas, she ran home straight to her mother, and screamed out—'Oh, mother! Oh!' all the way."

"Let her scream! She'll stop when she's hoarse."

"Indeed, she won't. My dear child"—Eva winced—"if the Father hasn't reverted to the subject, doesn't that show he understands?"

"He's waiting," said Eva doubtfully. She held out her hand to the dog, who drew back.

Rutger stood by the fire. "You can't really care," he said.

"I care about being rude," she answered. "It was the only thing we were taught to care about at home. Mother always said: 'Unkind and wicked are synonyms.' I can hear her saying it."

He looked up quickly. "Don't hear too plain or too far!"

"What do you mean?"—her lip quivered. She stood against the window: the rain struck the streaming panes.

"I was only thinking, we were such a long way from Sans-Souci: we mustn't hark too much that way!"

"I shouldn't have said that about Sans-Souci!" she exclaimed. She halted a moment. "It's all right, Rutger. I'm sure you know best. And I needn't be politer than you wish."

He drew himself up, just ever so slightly, in the fashion she admired: she looked away. "I certainly don't wish to give you lessons in ill-manners," he said with a tinge of resentment. "I say, Eva, you seem to think I'd make rather an apt teacher?"

Her eyes were on the carpet: it was a very worn carpet. Then instantly he melted.

"My darling—this is folly, isn't it? I didn't want to bother you, because you came from Sans-Souci, but I'd much better tell you everything, as you aren't there any more."

He seated himself, deliberately.

"I am here," she said and looked at him.

"I am burgomaster," he said, "but I want to be something more. They never talked of politics at Sans-Souci, did they? You don't know there is such a thing?"

She flushed. "You are laughing at them. You know as well as I that is a weakness of my father's. Whoever mentions politics has to pay a fine that goes to the Anarchists."

"I had forgotten the particulars," he curled his lip. "So I didn't want to bother you."

"But I want to be bothered!" she burst in.

"Yes. I choose to go in for politics, I!"

She sat down on the arm of his desk-chair. "Tell me all. Explain everything."

"Well, you see, I want to get into the States Provincial—in two years' time, perhaps. Perhaps later into Parliament. I need the two clerical parties for that—a combine. At least you know, little one, that all politics in Holland turn on religion?"—surely it wasn't his fault that he treated her as a child, if she proved so ignorant of the things that everybody knows.

"Yes," she answered humbly. "That's why father wouldn't vote."

"I don't agree with him"—his tone was nipping—'you mustn't mind. I care *very* much. Now, you see, I can't offend either section, and the High Calvinists are in the majority here. You can't begin by favouring Volda. We must have our Protestant Christmas tree here, and all that—*then*, if you like, you can give the Catholics a turn. But not *first* a Catholic Santa Claus in a Catholic church, a Catholic feast and a Catholic show! You'd ruin my chances with the other lot!"

"You have to manœuvre these two religions," she reasoned, gazing into the fire.

"Yes, if you like to put it so. But it's all square and above board. I don't intrigue, but I needn't give offence. The two sects hate each other like—like each ought to hate the devil! But they vote together between whiles."

"It sounds nasty," she said. He didn't answer, for of course it didn't sound nasty, if you knew.

"Oh, Rutger!"—she clasped her hands with sudden passion, "I thought it was so funny—so funny—the Dominé and the Father, and their squabbles. And the Baroness Bigi! But it isn't funny—oh, it isn't funny at all!"

"No," he said, "the Baroness Bigi isn't funny."

"It isn't funny," she repeated sadly. "We sha'n't be able to laugh over it, as I'd hoped. Oh, of course, we can laugh, but not as one likes to laugh! There'll be something behind the laughter! And that something's religion, for *us*. We've got to mean it—religion!"

"I do mean it," he said.

"Yes—yes—of course," she threw both arms round his neck—"Rutger, I'm so glad you told me! I'll help you! I'll help you all I can. I'm sure I can help you! Oh, I'm so glad you told me—it'll be something to work for! You must show me how! I must find out. What does Aunt Imka do? Tell me!"

"Do you know?" he said, delighted, "I have never told Aunt Imka. She doesn't care about the people. She doesn't know they've got votes. She just goes on as she used to do, except that she's grown—milder. So she thinks she's progressive. But she isn't my wife!"

CHAPTER XIII

MEANWHILE the new building must be taken in hand. As the Freule pointed out to her friends, and the Dowager to her acquaintances, there was little time to be lost. Rutger Knoppe had always been his own architect and surveyor, a man who tinkered gladly. His wife used bowls he had turned and bells he had placed. She liked to watch him creating things. He had been a considerate chief and cool rider. He was now a popular burgomaster, for a Dutch community expects its master to work and its parson to talk. He had the habit of shrewd measurement and swift decision. As a rule, whilst others discussed, he did.

"Oh, no, not at all! No, I shouldn't like that at all!" said the Freule Imka. Eva had laid before the old lady a design from "the Studio," sent by Melissant. The trio was gathered round the oil-lamp, at after-dinner tea.

"A heap of cocked hats!" said the Freule, over the pretty conglomeration of gables. "It reminds me of an old admiral—my cousin—who built his country-house to look like a ship!"

Eva laid the sheet aside, with a futile attempt to grin to Rutger. After all, Rutger wasn't nineteen; he wouldn't always grin over his grand grand-aunt.

"Neat and plain for me!" said the grand-aunt. "A square box with eight boxes inside it. Projections mean draughts!"

Eva became very busy over her tea-table. "Child, your tea is too delicious," said the graceful old lady. "I've been trying not to ask for a third cup. My father took ten."

"And he lived to——"

"George, that *is* a compliment!" interrupted Rutger, his brown face bright with pleasure. "Why, Eva, Aunt Imka thinks nobody can make tea but her! And you, it appears. When she gave up her place to you, she said, 'My last drinkable cup!'—didn't you, Aunt Imka?"

"Stupid—every woman past eighty has a foible or two!"

Eva was staring at the grand-aunt. "If there is anything else," said Eva earnestly, "please, please tell me! Please do! I couldn't bear to feel——"

"Stuff and nonsense!" said the Freule. "Nothing is changed."

"No, that's what I should have thought. Nothing is changed."

"Except one thing, for the better. I only gave cakes on Sunday, as we did at home."

"I like cakes," said Rutger quickly; he took one. His aunt smiled. Eva did not, for one tiny unsuspected sting makes you wonder where all the other midgets are, if you didn't see this one.

And her mental gaze was fixed on the tea-table at Sans-Souci; with an effort she withdrew it. "You are both too sweetly kind," she said with a conscious sweetness. "What would your aunt say to our home-habits, Rutger? If she knew we took rum?"

"We had rum-punch every night of our lives!" said the Freule, nodding. "My good father was so fond of it! He proposed to my good mother because she was so fond of it, too!"

"Melissant takes it in his tea," explained Rutger. He ignored both Imka's wry face and Eva's sly one. He held up his sketch. "How would this do?"

"Excellently," said the Freule, laying the square outline—five windows and a door—beside the engraving. "Design means expense." She frowned approval.

"Gables mean drippings," she continued, with energy. "And every bay-window means three winds instead of one. I want no more air or water in my house than I've paid for. And if I do have all this

expenditure, I intend to live in my own house till I'm ninety-nine, like my grand-aunt. Eva, isn't that common sense?"

"It is," admitted Eva. "We had dreadful draughts at home."

"And juttings?" cried the Freule.

"I beg your pardon?"

"Juttings! Excrescences! Ins and outs! Taste!" Freule Imka flung her hands right and left. Hook and tatting went with them.

"Sans-Souci is a beautiful house," said Rutger over his measurings. Eva stood washing up her own cups in the time-honoured Dutch fashion, which Sans-Souci, over its no less costly china, ignored.

"It is," said the Freule. "To see. Not to live in. For me. I don't understand the foreign villa. I understand our Dutch home." She nodded over this sentiment for ten seconds. "It'll fall off," mused Eva; "no, it won't!"

"Eva!"—Rutger suddenly laid down his pencil. "You like the look of this house! You said so."

"Did I?" answered Eva, taken unawares. Ah, yes, she remembered—the first time, as they drove up, in the summer!

"It is a very nice house," she said.

"But an ugly one?" persisted Rutger. Her smoothly spoken adjective dragged him on.

She stood rinsing a cup. The pretty custom somehow looked less pretty against her low-cut gown.

"Let me wash-up!" exclaimed the Freule. "You'll only stain that lovely frock! In Friesland we wore blue pinafores!"

"But ugly?" insisted Rutger, whilst Eva stood debating in how far the un-towelled grand-aunt might feel dethroned.

"It is nice enough, Rutger—oh, what does it matter? It's yours, and we're going to live in it. One couldn't expect it to be exactly like home."

"It is home."

She reddened. "Well, she'd already said it three times," reflected his aunt.

"Will you dry the things for me, Aunt Imka?" Eva spoke thoughtfully. "Yes, Rutger, it's home."

"Sans-Souci is very pretty, but it's nothing so amazing. It isn't—one of the great châteaux." Rutger, nettled, thanked his stars he hadn't said "Randik." "You're right, Eva. I've never given the beauty of this place a moment's thought. I suppose it is ugly." He got up and began to walk about. "There, now, you see, I meet you more than half-way: why don't you honestly say what you think?"

"Eva, you don't really mean ''ugly'? It's such a convenient house," urged Aunt Imka, laying down her work.

Eva dropped the wet cup she was handling: it rolled along her pale gown to the floor. She stooped. "It isn't broken," she said. They had both cried out. She turned on them. "Yes, ugly," she said. "Decidedly ugly. Very ugly. And dark, and dismal, and rather dreadful. I have thought that during all these dark, dull days. And I'm glad it should be so, Rutger, for we'll *make* it cheerful. When people are fond of each other they don't care for the—" she hesitated, seeking a good word, finding it—"*mise-en-scène.*"

"Bravo!" cried Aunt Imka. "No, the cup isn't chipped. It is one of those my good father——"

But her nephew, to her indignant amazement, interrupted her.

"Dull!" he said. "And ugly! And dreadful! And that's the place I've brought a young girl to!"

"Yes," said Eva passionately. "The rooms are so low, and the sun hardly enters through the little windows, and of course it's dark! And you can't say it's beautiful outside, Rutger! No, nor in. You can't. You don't. For you know it isn't. You said you'd never cared. And I don't care. I don't care. Only if you will insist on asking me—well, then I'd much

better say what I honestly think." She was a Melissant: she was nineteen: the whole neighbourhood, at this moment, was hideous—no, she was not going to weep.

"That is right" approved the old lady, rising. "I compliment you, my dear, on your cleverness in discovering already just what Rutger likes best. And now that you are so thoroughly agreed I shall wish you good-night." She took leave of them with her accustomed ceremoniousness: behind the silken sweep of her departure into the chill of the unheated vestibule her grand-nephew lingeringly closed the sitting-room door.

"I am so awfully sorry," he said, coming back to the semi-gloom of the oil-lamp. "It's awfully stupid, but I had no idea! I never thought about it. Of course Sans-Souci is quite unusually comfortable, isn't it? I don't think I notice much if houses are especially comfortable. I suppose you have hot water at Sans-Souci? The hall just now struck me as cold!"

"I don't care!" she said blindly. "I don't care."

But he knew that this couldn't be a permanent mood.

"I am so vexed," he repeated, and put his arm round her waist as if to warm her. "We must do all we can to brighten the place and to heat it. I'm afraid we can't do much to make it beautiful, dear."

"Our love will make it beautiful," she whispered, with upturned face. "I shall be happy, if you love me. I ought to be. I ought to be."

With his disengaged arm he pressed her head against his shoulder; he covered her face with kisses. "You will be happy, then," he said. "God knows I love you! You were too young and too beautiful to bring here!"

She was silent, returning his embrace.

Presently he spoke again, pleadingly. "This furniture is very plain, and heavy," he said, "but the drawing-room chairs are handsome, are they not?"

They rose up before her, the bulky pink plush and yellow satin settees, a triumph of local upholstery. Again she caught Father Bredo's glance round her drawing-room, when she had asked him to speak of his church. "Very handsome," she said.

He uttered a great sigh of relief. "And your father comes to-morrow," he breathed. "What will he say to our house? And of Aunt Imka's rejection of his plan for a less ugly one?"

"My father? He never forces his opinion upon anyone. Never gives it—never even forms it, unasked. No, never even forms it, unasked. He'll enjoy himself, for he's come to enjoy himself, and he always does. Don't say a word about anything—promise me, Rutger—and he'll only see the nice things!"

"Happy man!" said Rutger.

"He was born like that! We all were. We snatch at the nice things."

"Well, thank Heaven, the shooting's good," responded Rutger. "He couldn't say it wasn't, if he tried."

"He would try to say it was, if it wasn't. I'm not sure he'd succeed, where shooting's concerned. Still, he'd be happy if the day was fine and he only shot——" She paused, seeking to name a reasonable bag.

"A cat," suggested Rutger.

"Possibly. He likes almost every living creature, as you know, but not cats: they're such dreadful poachers! Rutger, you don't like cats?"

"I like dogs," said Rutger. "I like Sherlock. I wish you did."

"He doesn't like me."

"No. Strange. I suppose he's jealous."

"Rutger, we'll paint all the rooms white in spring—won't we? Or we won't, if you don't like. The Roman Catholics—or the High Calvinists—won't mind, will they, if we let them do the painting? But, in any case, do you think my roseate parents' daughter can't be happy in a brown mahogany house?"

"I don't know," said Rutger doubtingly. "Your

parents' roseateness rests largely on the absence of all shade."

"They must have had their small troubles. They must have met them. As all can," said Eva, "who love."

And they kissed again. They had not been married three months.

That night Eva dreamed of the unknown church at Volda. It was beautiful as a vision of Paradise, but they shouldn't have had a Santa Claus ball in it, not even though they did have a Sans-Souci puppet-show!

CHAPTER XIV

ON the last day of Melissant's brief visit to Skilda he took an afternoon walk with his daughter across the barren fields. He had shot all through the morning, and all through all previous mornings. He was satisfied with his bag, and therefore pleased with himself and his son-in-law.

Eva had joined the men at luncheon, and once or twice she had remained on to see their sport. She had always evinced some interest in the one "passion" to which her father unwillingly confessed. Unlike her mother, who frankly refused to "have anything to do with the creatures before they were properly dressed." Melissant was an old member of the aristocratic "Guild of St. Hubert." He fraternised over this little community with Rutger and persuaded his more economical son-in-law to spend some money on the sport they both loved.

"Yes, I have had a delightful time," said Melissant. Eva smiled at the familiar words, and vaguely wondered if in some far distant future they would be the last to fall from those genial lips. The weather was fine, for this end of the year—a pale silver-lit sunshine played over the black-bound earth.

"You haven't too many trees here!" said Melissant, sweeping the unbroken horizon. He struck a switch against his leggings. For so genuine a sportsman his make-up was perhaps just a shade too picturesque. "I have no objection to cornfields, but they are aggressively suggestive of the populace, and the price of bread."

"Which you never eat!" laughed Eva. Her heart

was blithe in his recovered society. "But cake is made of corn, father, too."

"Is it?" said Melissant innocently. "Then why don't the fools make it all into cake? Too much trouble, I suppose. 'Sloth is Satan's pillow,' as our hard-working forefathers put it. Well, Eva, I hope you're sorry that I'm leaving to-night? Not too sorry, I hope?"

"Very sorry," said Eva. She walked on a few steps. "And just a very little bit glad," she added in an undertone.

"H'm!" said Melissant. "Don't take me too seriously."

"You see, I should like best to have Sans-Souci plus Rutger. And that is impossible, I know."

"Quite impossible."

"I know. I know. I know."

"When a thing's utterly impossible it is so easy to remove the entire thought of it from one's existence; like subtracting ought from ought in your cash-book and turning over a new leaf. It's the just possible that I want that becomes such a bore!"

"But you've always had what you wanted."

"Mostly: I admit it. But I've also tried to want what I had." As he walked, he switched at nothing; his big emerald caught the light.

"Why, even last summer your ring came back—lucky man!"

"I have never doubted that I am a lucky man. I have preserved the precious thought—like a preserve!"

"I don't like Sherlock, and he doesn't love me. I'm afraid of his uncanny stare. He's always thinking, and one doesn't know what."

"Oh, yes, he's thinking: 'two's company, three's none.' You must give him biscuits."

"He takes nothing from anyone but Rutger. Well, he did you a good turn."

"And you! The ring is our talisman. I was stupid to throw—to lose it—and your Rutger brought it back.

That was the beginning of all your happiness. You can't think how I—what's the word ?—cherish this ring since then." He turned it on his little finger.

"Yes, Rutger's a dear fellow, and good to me, isn't he ?" she said.

"He must be a good fellow, he's such a steady shot," replied Melissant. "Yes, he's steady, and he's older than you, Eva. Has his habits and ideas formed, remember. And such method! Keeps his cellar list like his parish registers. Very unlike me, who only keep my banking account." Melissant switched at a dead leaf; he would never have switched at a live one. "It's a good thing you have got those old servants, on the whole."

"They leave me little to do," said Eva. "But they're faithful."

"Faithful ?—that is a dreadful obligation. I'm glad I never had those."

"You have Perk."

"Oh, he--peculates. I am grateful to him for doing so, in reason. It eases my conscience. Or suits my sense of humour, which is really the same thing."

They had come out on to the high road, not far from the house.

"This is the road!" said Eva, waving her hand along the shiny grey smear, "which leads to the beauty I was telling of. Yonder"—she pointed into the immeasureable greyness—"lies the one mysterious beauty in this land of commonplace, the Catholic church of Volda, where the show was; just the sort of thing for you, father, had you been a priest."

Melissant made a grimace. "A priest? I should have supplied half the tales of Boccaccio. I should at once have become a horrid, wicked mendicant friar! I am grateful I never felt a call to virtue; it would have brought out every vice!"

Eva laughed.

"You needn't laugh. As your Freule Imka says, 'A good priest comes as a surprise, like a good peach.'"

"I didn't hear the comparison."

"It improves the quotation. Why haven't you been yet to see this beautiful church?"

She told him. "You can't fine me here," she said.

"Your husband is right," declared Melissant gravely. "His whole future depends on his handling of these religious susceptibilities. I suppose you've got the Primitive Calvinists, too?"

"What are they, father?"

Melissant produced an enormous sigh. "I have neglected your education," he said, "but no man knows what he's got to educate his daughter for. How could I dream you would marry a politician? And if your burgomaster had still been an officer—does not that sound like Mevrouw Dickert?—then what would your knowledge of Primitive Calvinists have been worth?" He walked on grumbling. "Sons are easy. Let them waste a certain time and an uncertain sum at the University. The prodigal needn't have apologised if he hadn't gone abroad."

"I am eager to get the mystery—and the beauty," laughed Eva. "To the left, father! There's the house. It *is* ugly; that can't be helped."

"It is larger than it looks. That is always a gentlemanly quality in a house."

"I don't really mind about the ugliness," said Eva quickly. "No, I don't. I'm sure. What I mind is the darkness and the grimness inside. Look at it, father, staring at us! When I'm outside I feel afraid to go in."

"Afraid? My dear Eva!"

"Afraid! I'm afraid! Let me speak; I didn't want to, but I want to now. You're going to-night. It'll do me good. You must laugh at me. Of course it's ridiculous. There's a room upstairs, dark, empty, creaky—nobody ever goes into it, but it's there. It scowls at one. I'm afraid. I stand outside the door! there's a turn in the corner, in the top corridor—laugh at me—I shouldn't dare to go round it alone—not by

day-time—it's so dim, into the dark garret behind the black cupboards. It's always dark there. The whole house is dark."

"My dear Eva, you have always been in a modern house with large windows. I made Sans-Souci too light. This is a different style altogether, and calls for a different mood."

"I've called all I can; it won't come," said Eva, hanging her head.

"Look here, we must talk this over." Melissant stood stock still. "Why didn't you speak sooner? Does your husband know?"

"Oh, no!" she said. "Not that I'm afraid."

They both gazed at the blinking, sun-flecked building

"Well," said Melissant. "If you must be afraid, be afraid. One can get a lot of artistic satisfaction out of that feeling. Your mother couldn't, but I can; so may you. If you can't see the funny side you must see the romantic one."

"What a good idea!" said Eva. "How would it work?"

"Don't you remember my coachman whose wife ran away? He wouldn't see the romance of that, so I made him see the useful side and re-marry. If one twists things round properly they come right. This is your first discomfort, or you'd know how to do that."

"I like romance," said Eva.

"Of course you do. When your namesake—of whom you remind me as if I had known her personally—was turned out of Paradise she sat down facing the desert of Araby, made some coffee—why not? They had a fire handy—and dreamt a lot of Arabian nights. You see the connection?"

"Yes," said Eva, "but I couldn't dream all that."

"Less will do. Your practical husband, who likes good coffee, was saying we must adapt ourselves to our circumstances, but the artistic temperament must adapt its circumstances to itself. All the same, I shouldn't paint the rooms white. Leave them as they are and

live up to them, as the saying is. We won't imitate the man who divorced his rococo wife, because he inherited his cousin's Gothic castle. That was extravagant. He should have put her through a course of Walter Scott."

"Perhaps she couldn't——" began Eva.

"He might have tried first and divorced her afterwards. I remember you enthused over 'Ivanhoe' and 'Kenilworth.' It is time we entered your enchanted castle. It is a good house in itself, but it cannot be lived in like Sans-Souci. It wants devotion, a sense of duty, political aspiration, all the qualities that have made Holland great. I am sorry to derange your dinner hour."

"Rutger doesn't mind when or what he eats!"

"Really? Does he still keep up that attitude? I broke down in the first week."

To this subject Melissant reverted at table. He praised the cook, but he adroitly revealed to his daughter, before he changed the subject, that her husband did not complain because he had no cause for complaint. Then he retold the story of his foolish coachman who could find no bright side to the elopement of a faithless wife.

"Like my sergeant," said Rutger. "A divorced sergeant in my regiment, whom I couldn't get to marry again. 'I'd marry fast enough,' said my sergeant, 'if I was certain to find another exactly like her.' He goaded me into telling him he might easily find a better. 'That's just it,' said my sergeant, 'one that'd never give me a third chance.'"

All laughed; Rutger laughed loudest. The Freule Imka remarked that the men of the lower classes had no right to be unfaithful to their wives.

"It was the woman in this case," said Rutger.

"Quite so," said the Freule, benignly bowing her burnished head. "The unfaithful wives, of all classes, should be burned at the stake. That would keep them cool," said the Freule.

"It would," said Melissant.

She looked pleased. "Give me another glass of that Burgundy, Rutger. I hardly dare quote my good father in these latter days, Mynheer Melissant."

"Oh, do quote him: I am sure he was wiser than we."

"He always declared he had proposed to my good mother because, as a young girl, she had asked for a second glass of punch. He said he felt confident at once that she must be what you now call 'a good sort.' I often thank Heaven that he was removed before you discovered that all he said and did was improper."

"I have not discovered it," protested Melissant.

To Rutger he remarked at the station: "Your grand-aunt is superbly historic. She makes the fine old distinctions between right and wrong which were only possible as long as they called wrong right. We moderns, who have learned better distinctions, can only live by ignoring them."

"I don't agree with you," said Rutger, rather at sea. "But you don't agree with yourself."

"Oh, I do! I do!" exclaimed Melissant to that selt in the train. "All my long happiness is built up on my ignoring them." And he sat thinking of his tormented youth, which would have been unendurable had he not—to use his own boy-expression—"spotted the eatable bit in every stale egg." Dear me! It was now twenty-one years since he had smelt a stale egg.

Presently he perceived that he had lost his ticket, and when compelled to pay again before he recovered it, left the price with the guard, but redemanded the fine.

At home he said: "The house is uncomfortable, but they've got a good cook."

Mevrouw Melissant looked up from her flower-painting. "And the dear child is happy?"

"Yes, certainly she's happy. What makes you ask?"

"Oh, nothing; the usual convention. Of course she's happy. It would be absurdly vulgar, if she were not."

"Well, the first year of wedded life is always the roughest. You have to shake down together; and the sharp corners rub off."

"What curious expressions, Lourens! I never noticed it."

"We started smooth. She finds a man with habits and views, servants, a house."

"I must go to them in spring—not too soon—and help about beautifying the house."

"No—the only way to beautify the house is to accept it as it is. They are building an equally ugly one opposite for the Freule. She is quite right. The cottage I sent would be comic there. The whole thing—duty, arable land and the rest—is an impression in brown and black. Perfectly harmonious and satisfactory." He stretched himself on the nearest couch and chose a cigar. "Perfectly satisfactory and harmonious."

"Duty?" repeated Mevrouw.

"You couldn't live in a flat village like that, between the priest and the pastor, without ideas of duty and vocation and all that. Your life would be too frightfully dull!"

"But Eva hasn't got those!" argued Mevrouw Melissant.

"Well, she *is* a bit dull, but she'll get them in time. I entreated her to."

"What nonsense you talk!" said Mevrouw Melissant laying down her brush to let in her wheezy spaniel. "Of course Eva'll get her vocation in time. I hope it'll vocate as little as she did. Never baby cried less."

Melissant yawned. "Throw the engagement book across!" he said. "What have we on next week? Anything good?"

"Lots of things," replied his wife, resuming her painting. "Not an evening free. Hardly an afternoon."

"Let me see! So much the better. She talked some nonsense about being afraid of rooms in the house. I didn't understand. It must be her liver."

"For Heaven's sake don't speak of sickness! It

attracts the microbes. She's as well as we all are. And always have been. I must spend a week with her in spring."

"The shooting's first-rate," said Melissant. "I thoroughly enjoyed myself. I shall go to all these parties of yours."

"I wish Eva could go too. Poor child. She misses all that!"

"She could enjoy the local jollifications," said Melissant crossly.

"Are there any?" questioned Mevrouw, with a certain anxiety.

"There's a woman called Bigi has a Bible sewing meeting three miles off."

"One might get a lot of amusement out of that," said Mevrouw Melissant, painting meditatively.

"Yes," said her consort, from his sofa. "One might get a lot of amusement out of that. But not permanently. And not by oneself. She has a touching belief in Rutger's sense of humour. I advised her not to trust it over-much."

"Was that wise?" said Mevrouw Melissant.

"I'm not sure. A married daughter is as ageing as an illness. My wisdom is beginning to give out."

CHAPTER XV

NOT permanently. And not by oneself. Besides, Eva had never been taught sarcasm at Sans-Souci, nor even observation of human nature. Melissant, to use his own expression, took life as it came his way, "like a highwayman." He gained little amusement from the failings or absurdities of his neighbours, except rarely, in that ironic mood which—once more to quote him—"covereth a multitude of sins." His distaste for "tragedies that have occurred" closed the door on a lot of cruel scandal: no wonder that many of his acquaintances considered his conversation lacked spice. To the Melissant children intrigue was a technicality of the stage, to be seen, sometimes twice in one week, across the foot-lights. Your own friends were "nice": father liked them. Like yourselves, they never did anything wrong. Of all the luscious fruit in the garden why pick such as would leave a bad taste?

To Rutger and Aunt Imka life had never seemed a garden. A field to be tilled. You reaped. All the difference of outlook lay there.

The grand-aunt's husbandry, however, was simpler than the nephew's. For Rutger possessed an active sense of duty, while the Freule was possessed by a passive sense of rank. Life looks simplest to the very humble and the very high. As Imka Lexma saw the human garden, everybody who was anybody grew in his providential pot. The nobodies grew promiscuous, had no pot. When they grew too wild, they must be cut down.

"If you ask my advice!" said the Freule kindly: she sat sorting her breakfast letters. Nobody had asked her advice.

The clock struck. Rutger entered, rubbing his hands. The windows were a-twinkle with sunlight and melting frost. "Lap must poke up the stoves," said Rutger.

"Our dear Eva has discovered the poor!" explained the Freule, looking up from a coroneted sheet.

Eva flushed. "We never saw them at Sans-Souci. Father is generous, but he did everything per Charity Organisation and Perk. He says that to speak to a poor man of his poverty, if you're not a relieving officer, is as rude as to speak to a lame man, if you're not a doctor, of his limp."

"Tell us about your father: he is amusing," said Rutger, unfolding the newspaper.

"I wish he had known my good parents," chimed in the Freule. "They would have understood one another! But my father, if he had been alive, would have been a hundred and three, and that is unusual. The dear man always said, that if the poor knew the worries of the rich, they would pity the rich more than the rich now pity the poor. Not that he had any worries, but the principle holds good."

"They could easily do that!" exclaimed Eva indignantly.

Her tone caused Rutger to turn from his paper. "Your father was awfully right," he said, "about the relieving officer and the limp. They limp on purpose." He lifted, with the tips of his well-trimmed, rather fat fingers, the greasy envelope by Eva's plate.

"First prize in our Begging Show," he said. "The Brazen Medal!"

"Some day you must tell her my little experience!" said the Freule. "Not when I'm present!" She resumed her reading.

"The woman says she hasn't got bread, Rutger! Nobody ever said that, or anything like it, to me before."

"She has bread. Perhaps not enough gin."

"Gin warms: and it's so cold!" Eva glanced at

the white landscape. "She stopped me the other day. I gave her a guilder!"

Both her companions screamed. "A whole guilder!"

"She is warm then," said Rutger.

Said the Freule: "You won't be able to walk out."

Said Rutger: "I must speak to the constable. You needn't worry about the poor of Skilda, Eva! As for Volda, well, there too much goes to the church!"

"If she did get drunk," said Eva, stoutly, "I hope she had a good time!" She courted an outburst of indignation. Rutger laughed. He was not going to take the girl seriously in an altruistic or any other public character: even Aunt Imka, at eighty something, knew nothing, as the Dutch say, of "what's for sale" in this world. Aunt Imka's days were filled full of emptiness. All the morning she wrote letters all over the country: all the afternoon she paid calls, all over the neighbourhood.

"You had much better have spent the guilder on my box!" she said serenely, "if you want to do good!"

"I want to do good!" said Eva. "How can I, Rutger—if you don't show me how?"

"Oh, well—you went to the Christmas Tree," answered Rutger. "And the School Treat. You were awfully nice to them."

"One of the boys told me you had set his anklebone the week before. You might have told me that!"

"I tell you enough about the village," laughed Rutger. "Aunt Imka has more amusing gossip as a rule." Eva sighed.

The old lady cackled. "Rutger likes my letters: there's always so much about people we both know. Now, this is from Matilda Bigi, who is staying with the Utrecht Lorings. She writes that her third daughter wants to marry a Methodist preacher, but she'll see her d——" the Freule twisted her long neck towards the light—"dead first."

"Isn't that a secret?" questioned Rutger.

"So it is! She writes that it's a d——" again the

Freule's head moved—"dead secret. Eva, you won't tell anybody. I never can distinguish between the different kinds of secret. Anyhow, the third daughter's of age, so is the fourth."

"So would the sixth be, if there was a sixth," said Rutger. "The old Dowager may be a mother in Israel, but she isn't a Sarah!" He departed, laughing boisterously over his own wit.

"How absurd he is!" cried the pleased Freule. "Did you have such jokes at Sans-Souci?"

"Do you know, now you mention it, I don't think we did," replied Eva. "Still we laughed a good deal."

"Now, how could you laugh without a joke?" said the Freule. "I like laughing—he! he!—but I must have something to laugh at!" She chuckled. "Sarah!"

Little of the Skilda hilarity crept into Eva's home letters, but she was a mediocre correspondent, like her parents. Melissant always declared that the world would feel friendlier, if nine tenths of its letters remained unwritten or unread. Eva had quoted this excuse for remissness to the Freule Lexma, before she had known of that lady's daily sheaf.

"How true!" said the Freule, including her correspondence in the unattainted tenth. "Now, my dear, I must run off to my room. I have half a dozen letters to write!"

The old servants of course resented interference or change. Cook gave notice, when Eva ordered a hot dish for breakfast. "I don't need it," said Rutger in a tone which made Eva feel greedier than she was. She was, neither by birth nor by habit, abstemious. She came from a house where no child had heard the word "indigestible," where the very nurseries overflowed with milk (-chocolate) and honey (-cake). She had spent her early pocket-money on Turkish Delight and toffee. She liked to have things nice.

"So do I," said Rutger, offended. The hot dish was suppressed.

The man-servant gave notice when Rutger placed a

stove in the hall. "Oh well, you can go," said Rutger. So the man stayed, and scowled at Eva.

Rutger spent great lengths of the long days in his office, full of work. If he talked of it, her exertions to follow stopped him. His world had never expected a wife to share a husband's "outside" life.

The wide neighbourhood had called on the new-comer. As the winter dragged its hushed way through the long mists and brief snows—like a black-and-white tunnel—Eva crept into Aunt Imka's stuffy brougham—for the Freule disapproved of open windows as much as of open fire-places—and Aunt Imka's torpid Frisian mares slowly trotted the two ladies to some forlorn country mansion at the end of a serrated country road. If the people were at home, so much the better.

Humans of your own set are never quite uninteresting in their sayings and doings. Especially not, when discussed and illumined on the long way back, by so compendious a social dictionary as Aunt Imka. The old lady was not spiteful: she was worse: she was accurate. She didn't mind what she told, as long as she could vouch for it. To Eva she became an astounding revelation of humanity. She had eighty years to talk about. She had forgotten nothing and forgiven everything. To Eva, in that first winter, the change was as a step from a populous paradise to a window on Vanity Fair.

Sometimes she caught her breath. Sometimes she shrank back. Yet, then again she gazed, fascinated. "My dear," said the Freule, "I am so glad you were married before you came to live with us! Else I could never have told you——" During the long-drawn drives, through mute mists or sobbing rain-storms, the smooth old voice spun in its dark corner tales of long-dead silliness and sullenness and sin. "She wanted to—he wouldn't—she ought to have—you see, my dear, she really ought to have"—hardly ever "he should." It was a fine lesson for a young wife of woman's inferiority and man's prerogative—"and I may be old-

fashioned, but I think he was quite right!" In the sudden numbness of her uglified existence, while the black fields all around her dreamed their dream of wakening firstlings, there stirred in Eva's breast—not, indeed, as Melissant had intended—the confused murmurings of a new romance. "Is it possible?" she thought, "the people who did these things lived and breathed off the stage?"

"He was the only person who never knew," said the smiling Freule. "When she died, he put up a marble tablet with a weeping angel! A winged angel!"

"If she wept enough, the wings might grow," said Eva.

"That isn't orthodox," replied the Freule. "I was taught that the bad people all went to the bad place. And you mustn't spoil my story. I always say his angel was winged before she went."

Spring broke; the iron bands burst. The black distances shimmered into green. "Rutger, I want you to let me do something!" said Eva, seizing hold of her husband's button-hole. If he liked being snatched at that way—and she knew he did—it was his business, not his critic's. They were out in their garden; the April wind moved lazily, heavy with hope.

"I want to take my piano into the big room at the top of the house. You don't care about the playing, really! And Aunt Imka thinks it interrupts the conversation."

"Aunt Imka goes to her own house next month. And I *do* like dances and jingles, Eva. I don't pretend to appreciate the classics."

"Well, father has written about my birthday—I'll ask for a new instrument. And I'll take the old one upstairs."

He conquered his pride. "A piano is a big present. But, child, you don't mean the back room?—why you're afraid to enter it! It hasn't been opened for weeks."

"I want to put the piano there," she said. "It's going to be brighter and warmer. I want to use it a

lot. All through the summer. Rutger, it'll have to be the nursery—have you ever thought of that?"

"Yes," he said, with a swift glow in his strong voice.

"So I want the piano there. I want to sit there a great deal all through the summer. You will let me ask father—won't you?—for a new piano downstairs?"

"No," he said. "I'd been thinking about giving you a new one, anyhow."

"Oh! I don't believe that!" she laughed.

She saw him bite his lip. He called Sherlock away from the gate, where stood a tramp, one of many, repulsive and repulsed.

"Look here, Eva!" he said. "That was either a lie, or it wasn't a lie. Well, it wasn't a lie." He bent to pick a half-hidden violet; she took it, at his hand, without a word.

That very afternoon, in the hush of the somnolent house, she stole up the creaking stairs, along the hazy corridor, round the dreaded dark corner, to the waiting door. It had waited so long. She had thought of it waiting. A remnant of grey cobweb clung about the curiously carved handle and the key.

Four months had elapsed since her father had counselled her to accept the romance of the place. She turned the lock and entered.

It was a long, low room, like all the others, only longer and lower. But through its grimy windows pierced the pale westering sun. Its brown walls were bare of pictures; its black floor bore a couple of faded rugs. A great oak table, a couple of moth-eaten chairs, an old cupboard completed its furniture—fine old Flemish pieces in the incongruous abode. The great black emptiness, brooding around those half-dozen historic remnants, was full of a possible undivulgable past. Eva sat in the window-sill, as the shadows softly lengthened; she sat, terrified, listening angrily to the beat of her heart.

"My dear little one, our drive!"

Eva started to her feet, her heart thumping.

"Was it you?" she said, "I thought it was. Aunt Imka, do you know the story of this room? Who lived here before Rutger came? What happened?"

"Nothing happened. The former burgomaster didn't use it. Why should it have a history?"

"It has a history. All the wicked things you ever told of might have happened here. We must air them all out before it becomes the nursery!"

"Is it to become the nursery?" Aunt Imka crossed the threshold.

"Yes, I have told Rutger. I want to tell you."

"I approve," said Aunt Imka. "The Knoppes are a race worth perpetuating," she said.

CHAPTER XVI

A COUPLE of weeks later all Holland was gay with the first glories of the hyacinths: the tulips were coming.

Melissant reminded his wife of her intention to look up Eva at Skilda.

Mevrouw Melissant turned, among the hyacinth borders, and gazed away across the virescent slopes, towards the sun-smitten stream.

"Are there bulbs there?" she asked. "Quantities? Heaps?"

"I should hardly think so. A few, of course."

"Evergreens? Pines? I don't remember."

"Very few. It's not the kind of soil."

"I can't do it," said Mevrouw Melissant, stroking her wheezy spaniel. "I see exactly what it's like at this moment. Straight, all straight. Flat, all flat. Black, all black. Bare, all bare. Arable land and a sense of labour. Lourens, I can't go there in spring!"

"I should think she'd like it," said Lourens. "No, Perk, give the man a trifle, and bid him begone."

"You didn't promise her?"

"Oh, no. She was all honeymoon then. Waning honeymoon."

"Lourens, you know my character. I can stand any discomfort for anyone's sake, but I can't run to meet it. If she whistles, I'll fly."

"She's like us. She won't whistle."

Mevrouw Melissant stood thoughtfully scratching her lame favourite.

"Give me some of your bread," she said, "there's a little sparrow there isn't getting any. Perk objects to our feeding the sparrows. But he objects to our feeding the poor."

"The poor are nature's supreme stupidity," said Melissant. "Of course one can see what they're for, but—dear Heaven!—such clumsy machinery! Surely energy might have been developed on simpler lines."

"No, Charlie!" replied Mevrouw Melissant, to her mangy spaniel. "Can't you see that is only bread?"

"He's getting blind," said Melissant. "Nobody that wasn't too kind-hearted would keep the poor brute alive."

"Do spaniels go to heaven?" was her abrupt response.

"I can't tell. But they certainly don't go to the other place."

She offered the old beau (still in white and tan silk) a small fragment he immediately declined. "Do you want to quit Paradise, Charlie? We will grant you the benefit of the doubt."

"Favoured creature," said Melissant, also contemplating the decrepit King. "What a death policy! A possible bonus. No risks."

"Lourens, I believe you must have found a second grey hair. As for Eva, she seems perfectly happy, judging by her letters." Mevrouw Melissant stood gazing into the pellucid sunshine: the blue sky was trellised with a swiftly changing network of white fluffs.

"Yes—only——"

"Well, tiresome man?" Mevrouw Melissant smiled.

"She says so too often. I suppose it's quite natural for a woman to tell you she feels happy. A man never would."

"He does, when asked."

"Yes, because it's always a woman who asks him."

Mevrouw Melissant bent to the soaring perfume of the hyacinths: then, without further comment, she moved away to the house. In her own little cosy, rosy boudoir she sat down before her own little toy-littered writing-table and began to cry. The old spaniel immediately retired into his cushioned basket and,

hiding away his long ears under his other silky tresses, went to sleep.

"Mother!" Marthe had dashed in, as they all might always. "Is anybody dead?"

Mevrouw Melissant irritably dabbed her eyes. "Its nothing," she said. "If I'm going to cry like this, you children will have to knock. I'm tired. Your gloves have come from Paris, Marthe. Two dozen pairs."

"Where? Where are they?" cried Marthe.

"On the table there with mine. I shall have to pay, I suppose, if you've spent all your allowance."

"Thanks. You gave me such a fright, mother. I thought of mourning at once!" Marthe stood drawing out the long, soft half-sleeves of different shades.

"No, there's nothing really the matter with me. Only, sometimes I feel low-spirited. Don't tell your father, whatever you do!"

"Oh, no," said Marthe. At the calm tone of her voice King Charles woke up.

"It's a dreadful tiredness, as bad as a pain. One feels as if one could die of sadness, and then——"

"And then?" prompted Marthe. She was letting half a yard of dove-coloured Suède fall along her white arm. "They're beautiful gloves," she said.

Mevrouw Melissant looked at her daughter. "Then one puts on one's smartest frock and goes out to dinner," said Mevrouw Melissant. "So, you see, it's all right."

"I should take a pill," remarked Marthe.

"Quite so. Forget about it. 'Full speed ahead!' as Celia van Rys always says. Come here, Charlie boy, and lick my fingers. I like that. You're an old boy now, Charlie. Counting your years as one to six, you must be getting on for seventy. An absurd age! I'm thirty-nine. There's a stain on your frock, Marthe. It doesn't matter, but you'd better tell Mina to take it out."

"How tiresome to feel tired," said Marthe.

"And you're sixteen. But I had fits like that, as a

child. I used to cry, without reason, just because I felt so exhausted. So you see, you needn't mind. And, above all, don't tell anybody! Celia takes morphia I shan't do that. I shall go to Brussels instead."

"Oh, take me!" cried Marthe.

"I don't see how I can. I think I ought to ask Eva. Still, I don't like to deny you——"

"I don't want to, thanks! Theo Brent is coming home for Easter, and I want to see him in his uniform."

"Well, don't be quite so nice to him as you were last Christmas. A midshipman is not a desirable person to lose one's heart to."

"My heart? I only flirt with him!" said Marthe.

"Yes—remember that flirting requires practice. It's almost as exact a science as mathematics. I'm not sure, my dear Marthe, that you have a mathematical brain."

The girl whisked round. "That's father's, I'll bet!"

"Is it?" Mevrouw Melissant smiled, without a shade of offence. "You can bet those gloves, if you like. Well, your father would know. He has flirted all his life."

"I'm sure he said it first! You've been discussing Theo together!" Marthe cried hotly. "It's too bad: I thought we might all do as we liked."

"So you may. Theo Brent goes for a two years' cruise in three months."

"Why, mother!"—Marthe stared—"You don't think I'd marry a man who couldn't afford a motor-car!"

"Forgive me, dear!—they are so useless on board ship."

"Whilst a husband on board ship has his advantages," reasoned Marthe. She laughed, long and shrilly. Her laugh was not the most attractive part of her. Nor her brick-coloured hair. But she possessed a slim figure, big eyes, and a pearly skin. "I wonder," she said, "why Eva married Rutger?"

"Because she was in love with him, of course," replied Mevrouw Melissant, listlessly fondling the sneezy dog.

"Yes? I thought it was his expectations. I don't like expectations, and Theo hasn't even those. And why did the aged Rutger marry Eva?"

"Because she made him feel young again. He isn't so old. But you are a child, Marthe."

"Yes, I might just about have been his. He wouldn't have given me such a horrible name."

"I don't think any name's quite horrible that's peculiar. Your father remembered Martha out of his confirmation class. She appealed to him almost as much as Mother Eve did. She was a reproach to me, he said"—Mevrouw Melissant laughed—"the lady who looked after her household affairs."

"I know," grumbled Marthe. "You feel chirpy again—don't you? I promised to go fishing with Mom."

"Mom?" repeated the children's mother. "Oh, of course, it's Sunday morning. Go by all means, dear! The idea of Brussels has quite braced me up."

Marthe withdrew swiftly. To the clamorous Mom she said "*I* can't help it. Since Eva went, it seems I'm the Children's nurse."

Melissant, having happed on a specially delectable impropriety in "Le Rire," sought his consort that she might share and augment his enjoyment of it. "Isn't that a pure diamond?" he said. "See it sparkle! Now, how few people really appreciate such a precious stone. Rutger, for instance, is happy over any bit of coloured glass."

"Poor Eva! I want you to let me write to her, Lourens, and propose a fortnight in Brussels. We could get all our dresses for the summer and go to plays to which I couldn't take Marthe."

"There'll probably be few plays to which you can take Eva."

Mevrouw Melissant sighed—brightly. "That's true.

But I'm doing it largely for the child's sake. She can spend the evening with some of our strictly ultramontane friends, and the husband can go with me."

"Write to her by all means," assented Melissant, departing. "It'll be my birthday present. See that she gets blue clothes; they suit her best."

Mevrouw Melissant's letter reached Skilda on Eva's birthday morning. It's delivery was delayed, because Eva was in the drawing-room with her husband. A beautiful Bechstein grand piano had been spirited into that room the night before; the old Steinway, still full in tone, was already halfway upstairs, on its way to "the Black Chamber." A pleasing little love-scene took place over the shiny rosewood instrument. Fair-faced, fair-haired and slender, the young wife leaned against her husband's stalwart middle-age. Her fingers ran lightly along the keys.

Eva was not in any way a remarkable musician, except in so far as she was quite as remarkable a musician as she imagined herself to be. She knew that she could afford her father considerable pleasure by the inadequate execution of music they both loved. So she played Chopin to him, Weber, Liszt. Rutger asked for a waltz of the moment, the opera of the hour.

He asked now—as a trial of (and for) the new grand Bechstein—would she play a waltz by Strauss?

She acceded with alacrity, and when she had finished "Wiener Leben": "It *is* a beauty!" she said. "How you spoil me!"

"My dear child, could you have been spoilt, it would have been done long ago!"

"You don't think I have been spoilt!" She looked up.

"Why, I said the reverse!"

"I suppose you did. It sounded like what I heard." He smiled down at her. "That is the bewildering thing about you Melissants. By all the rules you ought to be unendurable. You confuse all my ideas of

education. I feel inclined to let the school-children do just as they like?"

"You might try," said Eva, striking discords.

"There's your father now! He ought to be altogether selfish and intractable; instead of that he's the kindest fellow out. When he came here shooting, he put up with every contre-temps! And you, dearest —I don't mind avowing it now!—I had a dreadfulf ear at first that you might prove——"

"Well, say the word!"

"I haven't found it—not the one that just covers my—my fear. You know that kind of feeling. Any-how, you aren't."

"You have found that I always surrender my own will!" she said, and she played a lot of clangy runs and flourishes before he could reply. But he awaited her at the end:

"We haven't clashed," he answered. "Not to speak of. Sounds like the old rhyme:

'Jack approves Jill's every whim,
As long as his wife agrees with him.'"

"I never heard that!" She stopped, stared up into his eyes, her left-hand widespread on the white keys.

"It was my great-grandfather's favourite poem. I believe his household peace was based on it. Ask Aunt Imka!"

She rose. "Thanks!—no. I shall not touch on that subject!" She came back to put her arm round his neck. "My beautiful piano!" she said. "My good, kind husband!"—then with a complete change of tone: "I am going out to the flowers! Thank Heaven, there are flowers again at last!" At Skilda they had no hot-houses; at Sans-Souci the chrysanthemums and lilacs touched.

She came back a moment later, her arms full of hyacinths, masses of white blossom against the dark blue of her dress.

"What are you going to do with all those?" He

had waited to collect some papers before going to the parish-hall.

"Put them about the room in vases."

"My dear child, in this low room! The scent would be murderous! You don't want to kill yourself and me!"

"The rooms are low," she said, dubitating. "At Sans-Souci we put them everywhere. We like the smell."

"Your healths are wonderful; you feel nothing. These would give me a racking headache in no time."

"You?" she cried, amazed.

"Yes, me—big, strong countryman that I am!"

"Big, strong soldier that was!"—she could get no pity into her voice, had she wished it. A couple of the flowers fell to the floor. He picked them up for her. "I shall take them away," she said, "I found a letter from my mother in the hall. She offers me, as a birthday gift, a fortnight with her in Brussels."

"Capital!" he said, with ready unselfishness. "You see how good it is that we kept Aunt Imka! She can always come back to me from over the way."

"I can get all my summer things in Brussels," she said. "Do you think, Rutger, they would move the old piano now, at once? I should like that."

"I will see about that. But I shouldn't get the things in Brussels."

Again she stopped, wide-eyed, with her flowers, in the door. "Why not?"

He hesitated. "You asked how you could help me," he stammered. "I—look here, it wouldn't be fair, if I didn't speak out—would it now? You see it'd set their backs up here! I don't mean the village-dressmaker, but the people at Kykstad. Kykstad's in my district; they're all on the look-out for you there. And they'll object to Brussels, for other reasons. I must be off; we'll talk about it——"

"By all means," she said on the stairs. "But I

quite understand, Rutger. It's nice to feel I'm helping —oh, it is!"

"I'll explain. I'll send you up your piano. I must be off"—he was gone.

She went straight to the Black Chamber. She arranged her thick plumes of perfume in overhanging masses that clouded the air. As soon as the Steinway had been bumped into its corner, she sat down to it and played fierce music for hours. It had of course lost tune in its journey, but she did not mind that. She went down to luncheon with a smiling face; and presently Dominé and Mevrouw Dickert stood before her, with congratulatory bows.

Both looked smaller and meaner than ever, Mevrouw in her elaborate finery, the Dominé in his tranquil conceit. Eva had now heard, during many months, the lady's complaints about her neighbours, and the husband's long discourses about people little nearer than the flood.

"Spring is coming!" said Mevrouw Dickert. "Now the roads'll improve!"

"Spring!" remarked the Dominé, who had seated himself so that the full light fell on a fresh stain across his knee. "Spring began fully three weeks ago, three weeks and three days, according to rules as old as the seasons. The Chaldean astronomers——"

"Solomon, come and sit here!" cried his exasperated spouse. "There's a draught!" she explained wildly. "Clergyman's sore throat, you know, Mevrouw Knoppe! A sad thing—clergyman's sore throat!" As "the Rabbi" obediently crept past her, she hissed: "Hold your hat over your knee!"

"What?" he asked, standing still.

"Your hat!" she pointed vehemently. "Oh, never mind! Sit down!"

"I know of excellent jujubes for the throat," remarked Eva. "I never have anything the matter with me, but a friend of mine—Rutger, you know, Victor Hugo——"

"What knee?" said the Dominé, in an audible whisper.

"The left," answered Rutger, and roared with laughter.

Eva deemed him unkind. She hurried on about her cough-remedies, while the Dominé found the green paint-stain with the back of his brown kid glove.

"Spring begins when the spring fashions come in," declared the Dominé's wife, who had called to talk not about cough-mixtures, but about clothes. And about clothes she talked, nodding her red feathers. As she treacherously travelled round her circle of acquaintances she reached one name, at which Rutger swiftly held up his hand.

"The Kykstad Notary's wife?" he said. "She's always well-dressed."

Mevrouw Dickert snatched at the bait. "She *is!*" exclaimed Mevrouw Dickert with fine scorn. "She gets her things direct—cheap—from the 'Bonheur des Dames' in Paris! I would rather go in rags—in rags, Mevrouw Knoppe—all my life than wear satins and silks so obtained!"

"How obtained?" asked Rutger artlessly.

"Bought abroad! Bought by a Protestant of a big Papist business! A business financed by the Jesuits! What do you say of a Protestant woman who buys of a Papist, Mevrouw Knoppe, when we know that no Papist would *ever* buy of a Protestant?"

"Won't they, ever?" stammered Eva. "I don't think that with us we knew—or thought——"

"We do know. And think," said Mevrouw Dominé, slipping with a loud rustle, on to her small feet. "If she doesn't alter, we shall take *our* church business from her husband, shall we not, Solomon? And in Kykstad the Church Consistory——"

"That's a secret, as yet," interrupted Solomon. "This worship of fashion is as old as female dress. There are clear indications that Isaiah's reference is to a goddess so-called. The Hebrew——"

"Solomon! We must go. Mevrouw Burgomaster has turned quite red with the attempt to follow your untimely learning!" Mevrouw Dominé bowed with much state, and great plume-wavings, as she sallied out.

Rutger did not at once return to the drawing-room. He retreated to his own den. "Sherlock," he said. "When a woman is young she can't realise how imbecile the world is. No, really, she can't. And it's beastly telling her!"

Sherlock sneered.

CHAPTER XVII

MEVROUW MELISSANT dropped Eva's letter and called to her husband. "Poor darling, the thing would be torture! I should find it torture! Any woman would find it torture! A fortnight in a dull town like Brussels watching another woman get clothes!" Lourens strolled in and read. "Knoppe can't help himself," he said. "Anyone who knows anything of our politics would admit that!"

"A fine for the Anarchists!" remarked Mom, looking up from his fishing-gear.

"It's pure generosity on her part not to say she won't come," argued Mevrouw Melissant. "I'll write to her at once." And she did. "It's so good and sweet of you, dearest, but how can I accept such a sacrifice? You can't possibly want to drag after me all day, seeing all those lovely things I'm getting—and then back empty-handed, to the creature at Kykstad! I can see it in your letter—of course any woman'd feel the same. You'd go about like what's her name?—Tantala, who was always ordering things that nobody sent! Mind you, we *quite* agree with Rutger, in his position. How pleasant to have none!"

"P.S.—Celia is in Brussels. I can go to her hotel."

"I am not going," said Eva to Rutger.

"Why not?"

In one swift glance she realised that she must be very careful, must shield him from his own generosity. With that face he was capable of throwing over his whole future career. She had never dreamed that one faint touch can turn a life's balance. And how heavily the scale falls!

So she lied to him, with quick resolution, for the first time, a pleasant, pleased little lie.

"I am afraid it might be too tiring. And of course I am so anxious to keep well."

"Ah, yes—of course." He came back to her. "I m awfully sorry you miss the trip," he said. "You dear little thing." He was moved: he told Aunt Imka.

"These women of to-day!'" sighed Aunt Imka. She then went on to recount an anecdote about her frail little French grandmother, who had remembered being put into mourning for Louis XV. But she wrote to her own particular city of Slaapstad about a specially convenient air-cushion to use in the new motor-car.

For the much desired, much needed, brand-new motor had arrived. It seemed as if the black trees on the straight roads blossomed to greet it. And the dust whirled behind it in a burst of applause.

They had got little good out of the old one all winter. The brick highways of the neighbourhood rendered motoring in that season something like rushing over a row of houses that have collapsed. Therefore the arrival of the new car had been postponed. But now it was come, a marvel of dark blue and grey, a landaulette. Aunt Imka declined to enter it. She clung to her single extravagance, her carriage and pair.

The landaulette fetched Cissie Brent and her sailor brother at Kykstad station for a few days of the Easter holidays, a farewell visit before Theo joined his ship.

Eva seized on the opportunity of doing up the Black Chamber, filling it with cheerful mementoes of the old life at Sans-Souci. Hitherto she had hung over its imaginary memories, hesitating. "I have mourned long enough," she told herself. She hurried up her guests to the decorated, flower-filled room. "Oh, isn't this romantic?" cried Cissie. "It is," replied her curly-headed brother, "but how did *you* find that out?" Cissie, qualifying for the law, was supposed to be as dry as a Codex.

But the Black Chamber echoed to these children's sunlit laughter. Eva, brightest and most elated, seemed to make up for lost time. Half their allusions were unintelligible to Rutger. His strained countenance caused them to go off into fresh bursts. Their occasional explanations fell flat. "How can anybody laugh so outrageously about nothing?" complained Rutger to Aunt Imka. "When I ask them to let me join in, they only shriek all the louder! And none of them knows why!"

"It's the frivolity of the age," replied the Freule, smiling gravely. "On the whole, it's an improvement on *my* time, when men never laughed except among themselves, round the table, before they fell under it!" She added, with a twist to her tatting: "That young fellow looks well in his uniform. When a man wears a uniform, I do like him to look well in it."

Eva made a similar remark to Cissie, as they motored back from the railway-station. Cissie had wiped away a quiet tear or two over her departing brother.

"Theo does look nice in his uniform!" said Eva energetically. "I do like a man to look nice."

"Don't let's speak of Theo," answered Cissie, gratified. "To think of the brown hearts and the black hearts he'll break in the next two years!"

"I hope he hasn't broken Marthe's."

"No," snapped Cissie, like a knife, "he hasn't."

"You mean she hasn't got a heart to break? Nobody has. It's only a way of speaking."

"Well, I suppose so. You may be right. Still, some people's hearts can be dented."

"Perhaps some people's can only be pierced. Perhaps Marthe's like that. Don't say anything against her! I love her,—as Aunt Imka always declares, just before she disapproves of something in a friend. And I like Theo. Oh, no: we're not to speak of him. There's that smart postman—boy! He's an exception. Good-

day! Have you noticed how much plainer the people are here than in our—your part?"

"Naturally. It's the soil. Ah, now we are out in the open. We can go fast!"

"The faster the better. Rutger doesn't like it because of the tiresome bye-laws, the bad example! I can't help it; Krelis must bear the blame, and the burgomaster isn't inside."

"Krelis isn't a beauty," said Miss Brent.

"No, it's much better a chauffeur shouldn't be. But I must confess, the general ugliness is depressing. I have thirsted for a pleasant face. All about Nieburg the people smiled to you. Here they seem to scowl. I suppose it must be fancy."

"Of course it isn't fancy. Do you mean to say you've not read anything about the influence of soil on development? Why, recent reviews have been full of it! I'll send you an article. Now, there's your husband! Of course he's good-looking, but he's—grave!"

"He's not a bit grave!" cried Eva with the vehemence that protests against another's saying the one thing we are resolved not to think. "It's his eye-sockets that are built that way, and his heavy moustache! Men ought to have big moustaches, but those oughtn't to hide their smile!"

"Women shouldn't talk nonsense," said Cissie.

"Shouldn't they! I'm glad you didn't find that out before Theo went! Oh, I've so enjoyed nonsense—nonsense—nonsense! Oh, it's done me such heaps of good—the nonsense! I want more nonsense—lots of nonsense! There—I do believe those are primroses! Still! How late they are! But everything's so much later up here!" She stopped the motor. "I want to get out. I can't talk about it, rushing along like this, cooped up. I want the air, and the smell of it. Come, Cissie, come!"

She was out, and away among the bursting beeches: she had flung herself down on the grass: she was up

again, among the half-hidden primroses and anemones: the sunshine poured down in lofty slants between the tree-trunks, in a shimmer of pale silver and green.

"At last!" she panted.

"At last what?" Cissie had barely caught up with her.

"Oh, I don't know—the warmth, and the colour and the gladness! The opening—the break-up—summer, I suppose, but it wasn't summer like this at Sans-Souci. In our part the winter isn't black—I suppose it's all the pine trees, big and little! The earth doesn't all look hard and bound and dead. It's the ups and downs with us, all green, about the river, not the great flat board, like an enormous grave-stone! I want beauty, Cissie, beauty—you can't think how one gets to want beauty, when you've never known you had it all your life!"

She lay back on the broken earth and played with both hands among the wild-flowers. She drew long, deep breaths.

"This means rheumatism," said Cissie.

Eva leaped to her feet. "Let us go!" she said. "I expect Aunt Imka in to tea."

They were passing through their village before she spoke again.

"Rutger has heaps to do. He is so thorough. The Governor told me his was the best managed district in the province. I wish he would let me help him; he says I can't. Of course I have a lot of time to myself—perhaps too much—and I think."

"I wonder what you do with it all," said Cissie. "I wish you could give half of it to a poor law-student like me."

"I can't understand about your studies. Do you really intend to become a lawyer? And appear in court?"

"Of course I do. If I can get cases. But I expect most from consulting cases—women coming with their troubles—isn't it a shame they should have to go with them to men?"

"I shouldn't like to hear them," said Eva.

"You hear them now—from Aunt Imka—or as jokes in a French paper! I shall try to help. I am going to write my academic dissertation on divorce."

"Well, I don't understand," said Eva. "It's too new to me. And none of our friends ever did it before."

Cissie smiled: "Good reason."

"And, then, in a few months you're engaged, and it all comes to nothing. Love's labour lost. No girl knows how her life breaks in the middle, and begins afresh. A man goes on in one line, but—any moment—a girl turns round an unseen corner into quite a new country. It's almost frightening, it's so queer." Eva spoke with bated breath.

"I shan't, in a hurry. Don't you think a fool of a man would fight shy of a certified lady barrister? All the eloquence of a woman and the arguments of a man!"

The servant came to the motor-door. "Freule Lexma has sent to say she has a visitor: if Mevrouw would care to go on to her?"

"Do you know who the visitor is?"—Eva stopped, in the hall.

"The Baroness Bigi. And Mevrouw Dickert is there too."

Eva hurried upstairs. "Come with me! Come!" she called to her friend over the balusters. She hastened to the very top; she closed the door of the Black Chamber. "Safe!" she said.

Cissie looked inquiry.

"None of the servants dare follow me here. I couldn't go to Aunt Imka! And the Bigi, and the Dominé's wife. After the primroses. And our talk. I couldn't. Don't let's talk, Cissie. We shouldn't talk." She lay back on a bearskin-covered couch.

"We might have tea!" suggested Cissie.

Eva turned her head. "Oh yes, we can have tea. You will find everything to make it in the little Flemish

cupboard. Even the rum. And father's special green brand. We can have the strong, wicked tea of Sans-Souci." She lay silent, her hands in her lap, whilst Cissie busied herself amongst the glittering, tinkling paraphernalia of the tea-table.

"Isn't this cosy?" said Eva at last. "And to think I am mistress here! With a house of my own, and a husband. I am awfully happy."

"But what do you do up here with your time? You can't use your brains much, or you couldn't stand all these flowers!"

"What I do? Cissie, I believe you think I do nothing—just moon about and complain! What I do? I've half a mind to show you."

"Have a whole mind!" said Cissie, drinking tea.

Eva tore open a little escritoire close beside her. A bundle of papers fell into her hand. "It's a story," she said. "I began writing it the other day, in this room. The room," she laughed, "inspired me. Shall I read you the first bit? Just to see."

"I'm not a good judge," said Cissie. "Fire away."

Eva began reading hurriedly in the long summer light. The rays slanted deeply into the dark wainscoted corners, breaking up the dull tones of the old furniture into a variety of warm tints. Cissie poured herself out another glass of the steaming beverage; the sheets of Eva's manuscript slid softly to the floor.

"I suppose it's good," said Cissie. "Somehow it doesn't sound real."

"Of course, it isn't real. It's a romance. It's eighteenth century!"

"No, but one ought to think it is; isn't that the difference? I told you, I was no judge; only you would have my opinion. I can feel the description better when it's really happened. Memoirs now—why don't you write memoirs, Eva? I don't mean your own, but Freule Imka's, for instance—all the stories she tells you? Those'd make wonderfully good reading. You see you haven't experienced anything of this

—have you ?" She pointed to the pages all over the rug and the polished floor.

"You think I could describe it better, if I had experienced it ?" asked Eva, slowly gathering up the sheets.

"I don't say that, but I should feel better that it was your own experience. Now I feel all the time that you've read the experience of someone else."

Eva put away the manuscript in the little desk. "I suppose that's true," she said. "Of course I haven't lived it. It didn't remind you of anybody—any author, I mean ?"

"No ; I've read too few novels."

"It reminds me of Walter Scott. Perhaps I shouldn't have made it historical. That is Rutger's step. He won't come up here. Let us go to him. Not a word about my book !"

CHAPTER XVIII

THERE was no escape from the Baroness Bigi. There was no escape from Mevrouw Dickert. Cissie Brent expressed a yearning to meet both.

The visit to the Dominé was naturally coupled with an inspection of church and school. Cissie, always outspoken, said the church was hideous and the school hygienic. This satisfied Rutger, who cared only about the school, and it did not disturb the Dominé, who cared nothing about the church. "Churches aren't for beauty, but to preach in," said Rutger. "Hygienic?" sniffed the Dominé. "Yes, the absurd fad of an ignorant day!"

"You don't believe in hygienics?" prompted Cissie.

"Madam," replied the Rabbi impressively. "I believe in muck-heaps and manure!" He stood in the midst of the well-drained village, diminutive, spectacled, not over-clean, despite all his wife's indignant care. In a loud voice he repeated his unsavoury creed. "The human plant thrives on a muck-heap. Typhus kills the hyper-hygienised rich. I myself am grateful that I grew up among such smells that the only one I now abominate is Eau de Cologne!"

"Which all the peasant women bring to church," remarked Rutger.

"There has always been a curious connection between strong smells and religious cults," said the Dominé, returning, with unseeing eyes, a small child's dirty stare. "The idea, for instance, that an odour, if sufficiently pungent, would reach the Deity as a prayer——"

"Solomon!" cried the little red-feathered parson's lady. "I want to show *Miss* Brent our monumental Pump."

"Madam, permit me to lead you to the Pump!" said the Dominé. "It was presented to the village by the burgomaster after our last outbreak of typhoid. I myself selected the appropriate inscription from the ancient book of Exodus. Not as ancient as most people think!"

The whole party stood in front of the handsome freestone column, on the chestnut-shaded square. They had become a centre of observation to half a dozen attentive urchins, to a yawning yokel here and there.

Dominé Dickert declaimed with unction the words that all could read for themselves:

"The Lord shall bless thy bread and thy water, and I will take sickness away from the midst of thee." Exodus xxiii. 25.

"They thought 'I' was the pump," said Rutger sadly. "We found that out afterwards. It did me a lot of harm. They said the burgomaster was an infidel."

"They were not to blame," said the Dominé. "The text is manifestly corrupt, and one of the earlier manuscripts, Sinaiticus Three——"

"Solomon!" cried his better half. "I want to show *Miss* Brent——"

"I fear we must be getting on; we really must!" interrupted Eva. "The Baroness Bigi is expecting us. My friend will come back."

"That I certainly shall," said Cissie in the motor. "A most interesting person! What a boon in your village, Eva, a preacher who thinks and who reads! Oh, of course his notions were utterly erroneous, but, then, how delightful to have a man always at hand, with notions, erroneous, that you can *discuss!* There's a man you can talk to. An intellectual argument, at a moment's notice, any day! I have to go to my own father for that, and sometimes father—won't. And, then, you must always remember to be filial. I wasn't born filial. I wish your parson lived near us! And to think so big-brained a thinker should have so addle-pated a wife!"

"He can't be big-brained: there's no room," said Eva.

"That's a quibble. These two will be before my mind, when I pen my study of divorce."

"The wife isn't half-bad," protested Eva. "She cooks his porridge, toasts his slippers, cleans his clothes—and himself, as far as he will allow."

"Well and good: Let him have a Hagar to do that, and a Sarah to sit by his side."

"Sarah laughed at her husband," said Eva. But this Cissie Brent denied.

Rutger, who was driving, stopped the motor at the Dowager's gate, for that lady loathed her friends' motor cars. Not having one herself, she complained that they dirtied her gravel. Halfway up the short avenue Eva seized her husband's arm. "You see, Rutger, it's no use!"

"What's no use, child?"

"Not a bit of use—trying not to give offence. If you drain the village, the parson says you increase the risk of typhoid—if you provide pure water, the villagers say you're an atheist. You quote the exact words of the Bible at them, and they think the devil spoke!"

She was strongly excited. Her arm trembled on his.

"It requires a lot of steering," he admitted. "But the whole interest of the game lies in that."

"You never even told me that story about your pump!"

"I had half forgotten it—why spoil the pleasure of the pure water? My dearest, you take the whole thing too seriously: it was almost a joke!"

"A very tragic joke. It shows that nothing really matters. All they really want is to disapprove. I might just as well have gone to Brussels!"

"Huh?"

"Just as well, as far as *they* are concerned. They'd disapprove of my staying here. Henceforth I shall do precisely as I prefer. I shall quote your pump at you!"

"Oh, that's too bad! What say you, Miss Brent?"
"It's a question of pure logic!" said Miss Brent. "You can do what you like, if your likings are logical."
"That wouldn't do in the country," laughed Rutger. "Suit yourself, when you can, but your voters, though you can't. Is the Baroness in? Yes, of course." As he put away his cap, he groaned. But only from a man's inveterate craving never to find anyone at home, for the Baroness was expecting them, and he considered her diverting.

And she considered him, as young men go, satisfactory. From her awful throne she extended to him the tip of her sceptre, or, rather her staff of justice: two lean fingers. She approved of his old-world manners, influenced by Aunt Imka, towards women and religion. He got up, when a woman entered, and he called on the Deity, in church. More especially he subscribed to sectarian charities, sufficiently, said the Baroness, according to his moderate means. Rara avis!

The Dowager Baroness Bigi van Tietstjumperadeel en Borrelhuyzen *née* Countess Stemmert was known all over Holland for the virtues she did not possess. That was the one supreme cleverness in an otherwise quite stupid and ignorant woman. She had built up, through judicious patronage of pious toadies, a sort of account-current in the fruits of the Spirit. A few in her own circle knew better, but kept silent from a mixed feeling of clannishness and fear. She was wealthy, lived simply, gave largely, and had relatives as many as she needed, and yet more who needed her.

Her great joy throughout life was that she had been born a Countess Stemmert. Her fine bearing was perhaps a little too conscious of the fact: it suggested that she had swallowed the traditional poker. But she had not: the poker was hereditary: it had been swallowed four centuries ago. Her fine head stood crowned with a cloud of glory: her eagle beak was at once suggestive of Imperial Rome, and "pollice verso."

Her black dress must have cost five pounds, inclusive of its spectacular train.

She sat in the midst of her half-moon of pale daughters, who worshipped her, and whose life she rendered an inferno, while she deemed it a purgatorio. She thanked Rutger graciously for not dripping black oil at her front-door, and she presented the apostolic guest of the moment, who unluckily happened to be a dissenting evangelist in Flanders.

Cissie Brent had also to be presented. She said her mother was a Gallas—a relation.

"Hardly, I think," said the Baroness icily. "My husband's mother was a Gallas."

"My mother," exclaimed Cissie, as much intimidated as her nature would allow, "is a sister of the father of Celia van Rys, who has gone to Brussels with Mevrouw Melissant."

The name of Celia fell like a thunderbolt. The five daughters all shuddered in their chairs.

"I do not know Cecilia van Rys," said the Baroness. "Yes, I have met her. At a wedding, where one always meets people one never meets again. I have nothing against the Gallas blood: it is blue enough."

"But a little too red," suggested Rutger.

The Baroness gazed round her five pale daughters as if to make sure they had not inherited too much of it. She said pointedly: "That was your remark!"

"And a rude remark," cried the frightened Cissie.

"Our brother Sipkes is from Belgium," diverged the Dowager. "He preaches the gospel there to those who have never heard it, the Catholics. I wonder, Mevrouw Knoppe, would your mother care to see some of his most interesting work?"

"My mother is in Brussels. She is very much occupied," said Eva.

"She has her evenings free?" said the Baroness, perfectly aware that the occupation was clothes. "Our brother could give her an introduction." (It might save the woman's soul, she reflected.)

Our brother was a quiet, gentlemanly man, much in earnest. His only desire was to get his money and to get away. But he had a boundless veneration for the Baroness Bigi.

The Baroness had unfortunately mixed up Eva's friends: she thought that Cissie, the poor judge's daughter, was Bessie, the great banker's only child. She knew no great bankers—or any other tradespeople—by name, except her own.

"Will you take back your aunt's mission-box in the motor, Mynheer Knoppe? And tell her I have bought some of her tatting for Brother Sipkes' bazaar. I can strongly recommend the bazaar. Juffrouw Brent, your mother might care to join a local committee?"

Cissie, half-way towards equanimity, found herself lifted by this appeal beyond it. "What is the object? she asked, in a high voice. "To make poor people happier?—better off?"

"Happier, certainly—oh yes, and better off," replied the Baroness, whilst the third daughter, Marcella, who had been obliged to abandon her brief love-dream, was explaining to Eva that they never went to concerts or parties—"oh no, we do fancywork of evenings, and read to mamma." Another daughter, Constantia, had just informed Cissie that they painted of mornings—"all the flower-glories in gilt frames were the family's handywork: you can easily pick out mamma's!"

"Are Protestants better off than Catholics in Belgium?" demanded Cissie. She was going to pay the creature out: she also had Gallas blood. In a painful silence Constantia glanced at Marcella, and Marcella glanced at Margot. Rutger always said he couldn't remember the names of the five Freules Bigi: but he knew they were all called after some wine.

"Christians are better off than Catholics," enounced the Dowager.

"I'm afraid my mother wouldn't much care to spend money on making Christians of Catholics," answered Cissie, pertly. "She would think it like

gilding gold, as the saying goes. She doesn't know any better."

"I am very sorry for her," said the Dowager quickly. "And you, my dear little maid, you should study your Bible."

"I've no time," replied Cissie. "I study law!"

A gasp broke from five angular throats. "That is very interesting, and very new," said the Baroness. "I had heard of the thing, but I hadn't as yet seen any results."

Cissie felt small. Brother Sipkes came to her assistance. "The young lady should know," he said, "that we address those who have no religion at all."

"Socialists! I'll help," said Rutger, putting his hand into his pocket. Cissie laughed: "Your special bugbear!"

"Everybody's bugbear!" said the Baroness.

"What is a bugbear?" asked two of the ladies Bigi, for Cissie had spoken slang.

"We must be going," said Evá, exactly as she had said it to Mevrouw Dickert, in the same tone of weary worry: and off they went.

"You have done for me!" she reproached Cissie in the motor. "You have committed every crime, and she thinks I approve of them all. A carefully built reputation of eight months—all Aunt Imka's labour!—whiffed away! I could weep if——"

"Nonsense!" implored Cissie.

"I didn't laugh."

"Thanks, dear. The worst impression was when she found out I wasn't rich. When I said I studied law. I saw it in her face."

"I feel choked," said Eva. "Up to here! Suffocated. There's a great weight on my heart. Fancy, such people in the world! Lots. And so nice. Only you and I never met any."

"I could scream for hours," said Cissie. "Only it wouldn't do any good!"

"Yes, it would. Rutger needn't toot. Let's get out,

Cissie: I want to walk a dozen miles, with the wind behind." She leant forward: she stopped Rutger through the speaking tube.

"We want air," she said, "and movement. I want to feel my breath and my limbs. You don't mind, Rutger?"

"Oh no," he said. "Aunt Imka will give me tea. But I can't understand your objection to the Bigis."

"Can't understand our—my——?"

"No; they're very much like the people I've known all my life. She does heaps of good with her money. And the daughters are amiable gentlewomen: didn't you see their paintings? The youngest is remarkably sweet-looking, Margot."

"Premier crû. Vieux vin," said Eva.

But Rutger pulled a face, and the brake-handle. "I don't see it."

"That is so curious about Rutger: he only sees what he wants to," said Eva to Cissie, as the two girls hastened along a bye-road, and the car whirled out of sight.

"What a good advocate he would make!" replied Miss Brent. "And what a poor judge!"

These words added to the weight on Eva's heart. "But I shouldn't call it curious," said Miss Brent, "I should call it provoking."

"Did you ever see such a sky?" exclaimed Eva. "The immensity of it! And the depth of it. A great blue dome; and the whole earth under it is become green!"

"An annual occurrence," answered Cissie.

"Not in all parts. Cissie, how the wind whistles! How it sweeps one along! I love it, here, out in the wide open! Look at all that up there, and all this down here! How big it is! Oof!"

"You're not eloquent," said Cissie, "but you mean well. Yes, there's a great deal more in the world than the Bigi."

They were going along at a bright, healthful pace.

The evening breeze, under the sunlight, went with them.

"You know whither?" said Cissie.

Eva stopped. "No. I mean, I hadn't thought of that. Of course we can't go far wrong. Cissie, suppose we go back by Volda!"

"I'm agreeable," said Cissie, "I mean 'willing.' Don't let me assert more than I can prove."

"Yes, Volda," continued Eva, not heeding. "Suppose we go and ask Father Bredo to show us his church? Rutger said the other day I could go now—this summer! It'll do us good."

"What fun, after the Bigi!" assented Cissie. "I've never been in a Dutch Catholic church before; have you?"

"No," said Eva. "I wonder whether it'll have paper flowers and plaster dolls, like the ones they take you into—for a picture—abroad!"

It was a long walk, even when a brisk one, to Volda, all between the far green shimmer of the cornfields, a lonely walk over the curved crust of the earth's smooth surface, with no human figure and hardly a tree to break the line.

Only a bunch of foliage, broadening slowly on the horizon, the hamlet picturesquely hidden against a clump of chestnut and elm.

Father Bredo was taking the air—plenty of it—before his parsonage-door. He greeted the ladies quietly, as the wind blew them to his side.

"Yes, we've come to see your church," panted Eva. "I've come at last! I've come! My friend Juffrouw Brent."

The father looked inquiringly at Cissie. There were Catholic Brents.

"Not a believer, but not an atheist," said Cissie. "I had better be explicit, because the Baroness thought I was both."

"The church is open to all," said the Father gravely. He led the way.

The sacred edifice, as all but the quite ignorant could see, dated from pre-reformation times. As a matter of fact it was very simple Gothic, early thirteenth century Dutch brick. The Calvinists had held it for three centuries, whitewashing its walls and its cult.

All that was now over. With loving hands and careful head, during more than forty slowly progressive years, Father Bredo had rebuilt and re-moulded its pristine glory. The beautiful blood-red of its outer walls, speckled with lichen and framed by sparse ivy, once more blushed in various warmths and shinings to the sun and rain of God's day. The Father, once started on his hobby, led his visitors to a closer inspection of the brickwork, in its three periods, and, moving round step by step, in the windy clearance, pointed out, caressingly, his recoveries and reconstructions of the original design. He found a willing pupil for his little architectural lesson in the ever-alert Cissie: Eva did her amiable best, more anxious to get inside.

"And this is the interior," said the Father, putting back the baize door. His voice sank, under its weight of unconscious pride and humble joy. As if Michael Angelo could have unveiled his own "Judgment" with the veneration of a modern art-critic for so ancient a work!

A sudden stillness after the bluster against the trees —a sudden repose.

The little church lengthened in three aisles, without transept, to the choir. It was full of dark carving with a little polychrome imagery, and a glint, here and there, of silver ornaments. Its stained windows were arabesques in a white setting. "Whereby," said the Father, with a sigh, "we have at least avoided the absurdities of modern figure-design."

"Oh, beautiful!" said the two children, side by side. They had never seen anything similar, in the devised bareness of their own chill dogmatism or the tawdry splendours of some foreign show-place. The mystic

presence seized them in the heart. The stalwart, silvered Father smiled a happy smile.

"It is God's little chamber at Volda," he said. "I knew He would come here. And I made it as fine for Him as I could."

He proceeded to show them how the two narrow side aisles had been divided—each into three chapels, at the chancel end by richly-carved lattice-work of black oak. The effect was original and would have charmed a more eclectic connoisseur than they. In these little enclosures the Father had placed what relics of Gothic statuary—mostly coloured—he had been able to recover in wide scourings of the iconoclastic north. In niches and recesses amongst the polished leaf-work small figures, lovingly retouched with blue and gold and crimson, dreamed and prayed, and blessed. The dim light from the rainbow windows fell quietly on the gleam of the altars. Here and there a few white lilies soared from a silver flask.

"I could tell you about it—how I got it all together—for hours—for days," said Father Bredo, "but I won't."

"I will come back: you must let me," said Eva.

"But before you go now, I must show your friend my greatest treasure of all."

He led them into the simple chancel, round to the back of the high altar, against which was erected, in the narrow space lighted by the great window, a small lady chapel or rather shrine. And in this cell, which was of silver foliage, interlaced to a circled bower, stood a wooden figure, larger than most of the others, three-quarter life size—a calm and rather complacent Madonna painted in traditional posture and garb.

"About 1400," said the Father, triumphantly. "Not later certainly than 1435."

"Why?" demanded Cissie.

"That would take too long to explain. But these folds"—the Father indicated their fall with a twist

of his thumb—"The work is Flemish. Their treatment changes after that period."

"What delightful detective work!" cried Cissie. "How much more entrancing than imaginary crime!"

"Hush!" said Eva.

The Father, whose face had clouded at the cry, nodded acknowledgment. He put out his hand and pushed apart the two halves of the figure, which separated in a line down the middle, falling open, whilst the left one carried away the head intact. In the shrouded cavity appeared a second figure, exactly similar to the first.

Not exactly. The Father stood back, strong and straight. As he gazed at the inner figure, all the lines in his square stone countenance grew soft.

Nothing was changed in the hidden virgin but the look upon her smooth, carved face. Into that had come a tenderness and pity, a gentle living sympathy such as only genius and emotion could have flung into the dead stock from the sculptor's burning soul. The features were the same, reproduced in a passion of divine response to human sorrow. The still countenance spake.

Cissie stood motionless. Unconsciously Eva folded her hands. She glanced up, and her eyes met the Father's serenely gazing at her. She blushed, as she looked away.

"Let us go home," she said. They went down the church without another word. At the entrance the Father could no longer restrain himself.

"It is unique," he said. "Rosenberger offered me fifteen thousand florins for it. I paid forty. And the maker some forgotten artisan. Quite unknown."

"Can everybody open it?" asked Cissie.

"No, indeed: there is a spring. And no one is allowed to touch it, except myself, and that man over there!" He pointed to a fellow, who hung, with both hands in his pockets, bumping against a chestnut tree.

"My sacristan and wood-carver. Jiel Hermus. He is deaf and dumb. He has done all my screen-work. He is a character. It has taken him thirty-five years—just a lifetime."

"The average now-a-days," said Cissie, "is thirty-eight."

The Father silently accepted the correction. "You are not afraid," he said to Eva, "of his infirmity? I should like to tell him that you admire his work."

"I have never met such a person before," said Eva, flustered. "How does one speak to them?" She went forward with the Father. "Oh, the fingers, of course," said Cissie. "No," said Father Bredo. "I speak to him with the lips."

The grey, shabby creature, Jiel Hermus, loafed towards them. His face had the closed look of the dumb. Its expression was not pleasing, with that heavy jowl and lowering brow. He watched his master. The women he did not appear to perceive.

At the end of Father Bredo's slow enunciation in the full light—short phrases plastically pronounced on his thick lips, the wood-carver unhooked his eyes, as it were, from those lips and uttered a few raucous noises. He thanked the ladies, said the Father; the glory was God's.

Eva and Cissie spoke little on the way home: the shadows were lengthening: the wind had fallen somewhat: the night was warm.

Rutger welcomed them at dinner.

"We went to Volda: the Father stood outside his church: he took us over it," said Eva.

"All right: so that's done. He's mad about his church."

"It is very beautiful," said Eva.

"I suppose so. It isn't my idea of religion. What say you, Juffrouw Brent?"

"It is very beautiful." replied Cissie, "and its beauty has kept back Christianity nearly nineteen hundred years."

"What is Christianity?" asked Eva. "Have some more fish."

"The brotherhood of all of us, in equality, under one father, God."

"Oh, I say, that's socialism!" exclaimed Rutger. "Eva, I shall have to go to Nieburg about my new tobacco scheme I was telling you of. I heard this afternoon. Do you think they would have us for a couple of weeks at Sans-Souci?"

"A couple of months!" cried Eva.

"Oh, no! A glass of Sauterne, Juffrouw Brent? By the bye, you were wrong in your quotation about Margot Bigi, Eva: it's 'Premier crû. *Grand* vin,' I should say."

"So be it," said Eva. She wanted to talk about Volda. But not to Rutger, nor to Cissie Brent.

CHAPTER XIX

"My dear girl, I've brought you two lovely new gowns!" With these welcome words of welcome did Mevrouw Melissant greet her elder daughter at Sans-Souci.

"They are my present," she continued, and she carefully seated herself, clothed in a brand-new and most becoming cloud of pink ribbons and white lace. "I suppose Rutger won't object to that? He is cruel, but I quite share his feeling. We ought all to support home industries. Only, if we always did what we ought to,—oh, far better die before!"

"You look fagged, dear," said Eva.

"Put it more prettily, child! I am all right. I ought to have come away last night, before we danced the cotillon. Only your father wanted to do the flower-dance with Celia. He is crazy about Celia. She is a dear. When you wrote me about the old Baroness Bigi's bazaar, Celia at once went to one of the popular meetings—she said it was very genuine and so smelly!—and she bought a lot of pretty rubbish for the sale. And you know she'd never have done it to please her noble cousin, because she doesn't care a stiver about that kind of thing. I don't believe she cares about anything except spending the money they haven't got. That's a kind of sport, like performing on the tight-rope. But it's much more satisfying," concluded Mevrouw Melissant, "to spend the money you have got."

"Rutger doesn't care about money a bit," said Eva. "Nor about spending. What he cares about is work: doing something—making. All this tobacco fuss he's

so full of—it isn't the profit he talks about—but the new source of wealth, as he calls it."

"It sounds like the same thing," said Mevrouw Melissant, concealing (aptly) a yawn.

"But it isn't, not a bit," replied Eva, with enthusiasm. "It's the development of the neighbourhood, the opening up. I can't put it as he does, but I understand him perfectly. It's fine—I like it. He works for the country. All his ambitions are like that, not for himself. He wanted to do real work—that's why he left off being an officer. I wish I could help him: I know I can't, but I wish he wouldn't say so." She gulped down something in her throat. "He thinks a woman ought only to be useful in her own family, and ornamental outside. He doesn't even believe much in charity. He says I'm not old enough to tat!"

"Don't complain of your husband, Eva," advised Mevrouw Melissant. "I mean, not to yourself: it's a fatal habit. You may to me."

"I'm not complaining," protested Eva sadly. "I'm only telling how I should like to love him, better than I can."

"When I am a grandmother, you will love him better than you ever dreamed," laughed Mevrouw Melissant.

Eva gazed at her parent. "Dear me, yes. I suppose you will be a grandmother!" she said in astonishment.

"Charlie, come and kiss me! I need sympathy," said Mevrouw Melissant. Charlie stared, blear-eyed, lolling with one frowsy ear over the side of his wicker "nest."

"A mother has various worries," argued his mistress, glancing through a fashion journal. "Here is Marthe now: don't you find her changed?"

Eva did not answer immediately. "I mean you, Eva—Charlie doesn't take notice, now-a-days. I hope I shan't grow so selfish, when I grow so old."

"She isn't as jolly as she used to be," said Eva.

"And all the more excitable. She used to be

placidly content: which is the simplest mood I can pretend to understand. Or have patience with."

"Perhaps she isn't well?" hazarded Eva.

"Oh no, we're all right. That's the one thing makes me see you have been living amongst other people, Eva, you never would have thought of such a cheap solution a twelvemonth ago."

"Little Mevrouw Dickert's the only person that talks about sickness at Skilda. She complains of all sorts of aches, thinks it's genteel not to feel strong."

"I know the kind. I had a governess like that. She taught me nothing except to despise ill-health. I am immensely grateful to her." Mevrouw Melissant dropped the journal. "I wish fashions would change every month," she said. "I don't need a single thing. And I'd scorn to buy, like so many women, things I didn't want."

"Your Brussels gowns are beautiful," said Eva. "Where are mine? I'd love to see them."

"Pannequet is sending them with some of mine that weren't ready. They're tea-gowns—both—the sort of thing you certainly couldn't get made at Kykstad—you can dine in them!"

Eva sighed. "The Bigi can't distinguish between a tea-gown and a dressing-gown. She called once, and I had on that lovely chrysanthemum silk. She said afterwards to Aunt Imka that I must have been washing my head! 'In the middle of the day!' she said. 'It would have been better in such an absurd dilemma to state the truth frankly,' she said, for she calls 'Not at home' a lie."

"You are privileged," said Mevrouw Melissant. "I wish I could afford my fellow-creatures such righteous enjoyment. You don't mind my laughing? I don't think anybody disapproves of anybody here. Oh, of course, Baron Knoppe does. But no one cares."

"They live near us, and Rutger rather admires the scraggy aristocratic daughters. He thinks they have—breeding. I'm afraid I have less breeding than he fancied."

"You have style, more than any girl I know," said Mevrouw Melissant, with spirit. "You mustn't mind, Eva; the very nicest men speak of a woman just a little bit as if she were a horse."

"He is full of his tobacco scheme as he calls it. I hope it will succeed," said Eva.

"So do I. Everything ought to succeed. And most things do if we only want them to. Life's a spurt of will-power. Say you're not tired, and you'll feel well. Here's an advertisement in this paper. Health and wealth for five and sixpence! You buy the book. Much better than buying a novel; only I shouldn't read it. And it isn't a question of books. It's largely a question of wanting to please other people. How much is five and sixpence in Dutch money? There's a whole shop with hats at that price in Bond Street, this paper says."

"So you mustn't worry about Marthe," said Eva, who didn't like health-books. Nor hats at five and sixpence. And who didn't feel at ease about her sister?"

"No, indeed! I am quite well, yet the doctor says worry would kill me. I told him I didn't know how it feels. Eva, I hope you haven't noticed how much more I talk about myself? It's my age. If Charlie were a pup, I should teach him to bark every time I said 'I.' It could easily be done in Dutch—not in French. If I wanted to be egotistical, I should have to talk French; he wouldn't know the 'je.'"

"You have spoken to a doctor—what about?" questioned Eva, scrutinising her mother.

"Oh, nothing. Katzenjammer. He said I was nervous. Of course I am, like all my friends; I couldn't bear to be old-fashioned. And if you're nervous, you don't get some other horrid illness. You go on being nervous till you're very old, and then you die. That is an excellent arrangement. Nobody would want to live after everybody else wanted them dead."

"Don't talk like that, mother; you're as young as I am."

"Yes, that's why I talk like that. All the same, I mean it. The only way is to take life and death and joy and grief exactly as they come."

"And you talk like that because you are as happy as I have always been." Eva strolled away; her heart was bursting. She was lonely at Sans-Souci.

She wandered among the rose-bushes, in winding alleys of yellow and pink. Under a bower of Gloire de Dijon, unsullied by rain, she happed on Victor Hugo, contemplative, forbidding, a half-closed pamphlet between his lean fingers. The odour of roses and underlying mignonette was everywhere, in a glamour of radiance and heat.

"Dreaming?" smiled Eva.

"Yes," said Victor Hugo. "Thank goodness. Dreaming of reality in a world of shams."

Eva sat down beside him. "If you're nicely rude, I shall stay," she said. "If you're nastily rude, I shall go." He moved away from her, ever so little. Above them, all around them, hung thick masses of flesh-coloured blossoms. Were there ever such roses anywhere as at Sans-Souci?

"And I want you to be particularly nice," continued Eva, "because I have come to ask for your sympathy."

"Your ladyship must be hard put to it," sighed Victor Hugo. "Where is my Lord of Skilda? Where——"

"I have begun a story, and I want you to praise it," interrupted Eva impatiently.

"A story! The mornings must indeed be long and lonely in the desert!"

"It is a romantic story,"—already she had produced the manuscript.

"Yes. Nothing so conduces to romantic writing as dearth of romance."

"You will listen, will you not?" pleaded Eva. "And you will advise me how to go on?"

"I am your servant," he replied bitterly. "Have I ever been anything else? I will listen, Mevrouw, as my father listens when your father commands."

Eva hesitated. "I don't command; I entreat," she said, and commenced reading.

In front of them spread a border of Escholtzias, the early variety. Whilst Eva read, these yellow blooms, slipping into the shade of the bower, gradually closed themselves up, as is their habit, in long folds, tight as tight could be. Victor Hugo noted this little incident with a grim satisfaction, a terrible put-out of his pale under-lip.

As soon as she had stopped, he proffered a question: "There's a book in the library here called 'Gil Blas'—have you read it?"

"No. So my book can't be like it."

"It is not. Nobody ever uses the books here! Your father can't read one that existed fifty years ago or that'll exist fifty years hence."

"I thought you might say my book was like Walter ——."

"It is—why say so? Didn't you ask your husband, Mevrouw? I suppose he never reads—anything but fact?"

"You are mistaken; what made you think so? He has read half a dozen novels that he always remembers, and quotes."

"Oh, please tell me which! I shall know the man at once!"

"Don Quixote is his favourite. And some of Dumas. And David Copperfield."

"Ah—and old Peggotty is his pet hero, I am sure."

"Yes, you have guessed right," she said, very vexed. "Why don't you speak about my book?"

"I thought so," he replied wearily. "Humanity is so same. There are five thousand varieties of roses, and not fifty of us. Why should I speak of your book, and vex you more, Mevrouw? It would have been so

much simpler had you read the critic's comedy in 'Gil Blas.'"

"You think it's rubbish?"

"Why shouldn't you continue to write it if you promise not to publish? It is one of the countless books that—that——"

"Shouldn't be published!"

"Oh, not as bad as that. That needn't be published. There's no excuse for publishing a book they wouldn't pay for. Yet they pay for the worst."

"How about your verses?" she asked, biting her lip.

"My verses will never be published. As it happens —your father offered to pay for them. But I go on writing them, and you may go on writing your romance."

"Thanks," she said, rising. "But I believe one can keep back a romance, and one can't keep back verses."

"Now you are angry," said Victor Hugo, still wearily. "Of course. But if you are so desirous to give the world books, why don't you? Why not start a good village-library in your desert? I asked Mynheer Melissant. He said there was nothing of the kind."

"Did he advise it?" demanded Eva, clutching her manuscript.

"You know your father. He said it would be sinful to tell Skilda there was another world outside."

"Well, I'll think of it," said Eva. "At Skilda there are always complications that wouldn't have occurred to one here. I want to thank you—honestly—for your frankness about my book."

Victor Hugo's gaze was fixed on the Escholtzias. But he answered gracefully that he would at any time sacrifice his whole peace of mind for Mevrouw Knoppe.

Eva found plenty of time to re-discuss the subject, for Rutger's business was keeping him much longer than he had expected. He was making the discovery that you can't get a business-man to see the finest investment at the same angle, so to speak, as yourself. Even Melissant, so unexpectedly shrewd as a financier, asked for time and more facts.

"Eva wishes the present I still owe her to take the shape of a lot of cheap books," said Melissant. "Another investment of which the interest may prove doubtful—eh?"

"Be nice to Bessie, Eva; we need her rich father," said Rutger. Eva listened, rather gratified. After all, none of us grands seigneurs are quite above that sort of thing. Nobody, now-a-days, is altogether *sans peur* for what he wants to get, or *sans reproche* in getting it. She would have liked Bessie to come back with her to Skilda. She dreaded, more and more, the return there without some bit of the old home.

"But I can't," said Bessie. "Cissie told me she enjoyed herself immensely. But I can't. I believe you can keep a secret? Cissie can. I couldn't. I'm going to be engaged."

"Oh, Bessie, let me congratulate you and kiss you! How do you mean 'going to be?'"

"My father's arranging it"—the big soft blonde sank away among cushions. "There's a business side to it for him. I don't mind; but I've seen the man, of course, and I like him. He isn't like my ideal, an Italian brigand, but it isn't likely he would be."

"Do I know him?" asked Eva.

"Oh no: he lives in Frankfort. He's enormously rich—millions. We shall have a dozen horses, and several motor-cars."

"Ah!—how nice."

"And a place in the Taunus. Yes, it is nice: that's why I'm doing it. I've always liked luxury, and that'll be the real thing—the sort of thing we don't know here in Holland. There's a thorn, of course. There always is—his name's Schulz."

"The Taunus is beautiful, isn't it?" said Eva.

"Yes, I believe so. You see father's not an American banker: or he'd have bought me a peer or a prince. It's dreadful living in such a small country, but he's doing his best!" Bessie smiled contentedly, and stroked her fat arm. "I make no pretence," she said.

"I want money—money. Is that you Cissie? I've been telling Eva. I've always heard about money. I want more of it. I want people to say: there's the rich——" She broke off.

"Frau Schulz," said the merciless Cissie.

"Oh, I hope you will be intensely happy," said Eva. "I do hope so!"

Perhaps the fervour of the cry was not more pleasing to Bessie than the bluntness of her other friend. "At least, there'll be a solid something to fall back upon, if the man should prove a disappointment," she replied.

"Ah!" said Eva, and a moment later: "Quite true."

"You need a something solid to fall back upon, Bessie," agreed Mejuffrouw Brent. She kissed Eva, and plumped down, as hard as her lithe figure could plump, beside the plump Bessie.

CHAPTER XX

THEY went back to Skilda for the few bright weeks of summer: then Rutger's business recalled him to Sans-Souci. He was delighted with this new thing "business." In love with the word.

Tobacco. Tobacco. And trams. Even Aunt Imka, accustomed to consider her grand-nephew perfection, occasionally changed the subject. But he noticed that, and dropped it, huffed, for a week. His womenkind had to resume it.

And, indeed, it was a great undertaking, worthy all the concentration of the quondam cavalry officer. The land of his two parishes was, on the whole, unusually fertile—a light sand soil, richly seasoned with loam. But a wide stroke, along a higher reach of fir-trees, at the far end of the poorer commune, Volda, lay unmixed and waste. It was this stretch that Rutger longed to fertilise and plant with tobacco. In connection with the first project he had taken up another for laying down a side-line to the Kykstad electric tram. Both schemes demanded capital: the second also needed the support of the States Provincial: he was now far more anxious than formerly for election to that body. But capital was the great thing. Unprocurable in Ultima Thule. Common as paving-stones in the streets of Nieburg.

But when you stoop to paving-stones you find they won't move. And a proud man soon tires of stooping.

He came home one night quite wretched. She went after him at once to their room. "Tell me," she said.

"It's no use," he responded. "I wasn't made for business."

"Yes, you were," she said quickly. "Father says so." And surely he wasn't made for poetry, and art.

He answered with pique: "Your father? He won't venture a cent! That's it! They all approve of the idea, but when it comes to risking money—no!" He walked up and down the room. She drew one of the new library books off a pile—for that was *her* hobby now—and began fitting its brown-paper cover.

"Yet it's bound to pay!" he exclaimed. "But the business men want all the profit, and I must and will have some of that for my villagers." He turned to her: "Eva, no one who hasn't had to do with them can *dream* what blackguards these great financiers are! You needn't look so scared! I know we were robber-knights: it wasn't nice, but at least it was open and above board. But these slimy swells—my God!" He struck his forehead: she had never known him to do anything half as dramatic as that: she was quite pleased at seeing him so righteously wroth, so moved.

"The only man that doesn't ask for bonuses, and founders' shares and preference stock and all that, is old Gallas, Celia's father."

"I'm glad of that," said Eva. "I like——"

"You needn't be. He wants to put in his son Udo, wants to have him back from the Indies on purpose. You know this son—Udo Gallas?"

"No: I never saw him. The Gallases came to live here after he went out."

"As lately as that? Well, he has been in Deli a couple of years, on a big plantation. Mevrouw Bigi now—she's willing enough to help—unfortunately she thinks smoking's sinful! But she has promised to take ten full shares in the trams: she feels for my poor peasants. That's the blood!"

"Yes," said Eva. "Still, your Aunt Imka's stories of her father——"

"I disagree with you. Aunt Imka thinks they should be treated as children—even whipped. So did her father. *I* can only argue. Are they happier under me?

I'm not sure." He took up one of the books, mechanically, and dropped it.

"You approve of these?" said Eva.

"Oh yes, all right. Your books won't do any harm, but my works'll do good. I'm sorry your father couldn't see that. It's too bad to think it's all come to nothing. And that I can't even ask my uncle—tiresome old man!"

"You couldn't ask your uncle?"

"No, certainly not. After his treatment of you."

"Well, at any rate, I can ask my father," thought Eva; and she very soon did so.

"Yes," nodded Melissant. "I expected you would."

"It's going to fall through, father: that'll be dreadful for Rutger."

"It will. Very vexing. But if I flung my money where it could fall through, that would be far more dreadful for me. My dear, I don't want to see the bottom of my money-chest, and I never shall, unless I make a hole in it."

"But you might take ten shares?"

"Not one. It is a matter of principle. I never take a share. I don't believe in a company that isn't worked by a financier, and when a financier works a company, I know he's got the cream off it, and the milk he offers me will probably prove chalk and water. I won't have a single dividend, Eva: I want mortgages and gold bonds. It's the only way to insure one's capital."

"As a charity, then—you who give away so much!"

"I give away a tenth of my income—to gag my conscience—not a penny less and not a penny more. I forward it to the proper officials, with just a margin for Perk. I never entertain an appeal or give alms to a beggar. And having sacrificed my tenth, I never trouble about luxury or distress. It's the only way, in these hyper-sensitive days, to enjoys one's income."

"Father, thank you for telling me——"

"I tell you unwillingly, because I want you to understand. I have three or four ideas on which my entire

felicity is built up. This is one of them. I don't remember the others, but they crop up, when needed. Everybody I have about me may do exactly as they like, but they must leave me my rules. They're the wheels my car runs on. I can't upset Dame Fortune: never man loved her more." He smiled to Eva. "The older she grows, the less one would like to lose her," he said.

"Yes, dear," said Eva: already she had resolved to go to Baron Knoppe. "I quite understand. Quite. Of course you can't."

"I am so glad. And now I must go and ride with your mother: what do you intend to do with this beautiful evening?"

"I am going for a walk."

"With Rutger?"

"No, by myself."

"Yes. When you are my age you will never want to be alone."

But Eva was anxious to be alone. True, she stopped on the verandah and appealed to Sherlock. But Sherlock only scowled at her, though he perfunctorily wagged his tail. She might have spared herself the rebuff. Sherlock never accompanied her if Rutger remained in the house. She scolded herself as she walked along for this attempt to conciliate Sherlock.

The road from Sans-Souci to Randik, after the first ten minutes of villa publicity, becomes a recognisedly lonely and lovely one. It winds away slightly uphill, and then down into a chasm of pine forests. The pine forests are Randik. Eva hurried along through the gentle summer evening; the golden shadows lengthened between the tall black stems.

Right beyond, off the shiny road, in a dark path amongst the mellow twilights, with the endless aisles of pillars all around her, she stopped suddenly to ask herself had she not turned too soon on the near side of the avenue, losing her way. The shadows played and cheated her between the tall black stems.

Before she could decide, a great dog—a blue Dane—came bounding, in deep-throated bayings, towards her, filling the hushed woods with his tumult of alarm.

She shuddered back; then at once she went forward, with outstretched hand. Another voice called to the dog, clear command in it—a shrill twang. Round a bush of blossoming clethra came the old man himself, Baron Knoppe.

"Madam, pray are you aware that you are trespassing?"

"If so, it is in my uncle's grounds," replied Eva.

The old man, tall, thin, erect, in scrupulous black coat and huge collar points, came closer. "Ah!" he exclaimed, "all the same, the penal code—article three six one—would apply."

"A fine of one guilder!" said Eva.

The old man snorted—it was his laugh. The retort pleased him. "Mevrouw Burgomaster!" he chuckled. "That's right." He stared her out of countenance. "You walk far," he said, "and alone, and late."

"I was coming to see you, Mynheer."

"So? 'Tis a good thing you met both of us at once."

"I am not afraid of dogs," said Eva, again extending her hand to the slowly advancing muzzle, "and I know that not every bark means a bite."

"H'm!" Around his toothless jaws curved something like a grin.

She was interested in him, but not much. Report said he had ill-treated his childless wife.

"To see me, eh! And what have you come to ask?"

"You are right," she said modestly, "I have come to ask, not to beg. I ask you to take an interest in your nephew's tobacco plantations—may I speak, please?—to examine his scheme as a business transaction. I am sure you will find it good."

"Why, pray?" He had turned, walking along, his stick behind his back. The great Dane strode between them.

"Rutger is not romantic; he says the Knoppes are not."

"Does he? I'm not so sure. There's sweet romance and stern romance."

"This is just a question of shares and dividends."

"You seem to know a lot about it, Mevrouw Knoppe. Well, you are *not* afraid of dogs. Supposing this old dog doesn't bite?" He turned to her: "Eh! Supposing this old dog doesn't bite?"

She walked on in silence, but she had the wit to smile.

"I am a disagreeable old man," he said, under the summer shadows; "Rutger will have told you that. I like being disagreeable. And I am unjust. Life has been unjust to me. I like being unjust."

She sighed.

"You," he continued, speaking with virulence, "you come from a pleasance of continuous pleasantry. Life's a long joke to Melissant. I loathe him for that. Why do you come here? I'm rude to you; I'm rude to everybody. It's the one power of my position; I enjoy being rude. God knows I enjoy little else." He walked on. "Why don't you answer?" he asked.

"Because I should insult you with my pity," she said.

"Eh! So, so! Pity! No, thank you. I am accustomed to fear."

"Well, I'm not exactly enjoying myself," she said, stroking the slow dog's head.

"That's my word. I enjoy bullying people—the sneaks. Rutger won't stand bullying, so we fell out."

"Because he wasn't a sneak," she said, quickly.

"Men must take a rich man and a great man as he is, whilst there are still rich men and great men. We're not all Socialists yet." He gave a sort of squeak, and struck with his stick at one of his own pines.

"It doesn't give way," said Eva. "Now, that little clethra would. Your Nobleness may bully me, but please look at his plans."

The old Baron stumbled on a few steps, muttering. Then he said: "I won't appear. If it's a good investment I'll take it up through Gallas, who's interested in it; but only if it pays, and the profits must go to the shareholders. I don't believe in modern philanthropics. I suppose Rutger wants to disseminate, eh? That's all nonsense. Keep your poor poor and mass your capital. That's prosperity, and power. Look at Russia and the United States! Can you tell your husband that?"

"Yes," said Eva.

"You might tell it him as coming from you."

"Oh!" said Eva.

"He'd be more likely to believe it. He thinks I'm a Pharisee, because I always judge right. You all do. Oh, I know! And that stupid grand-aunt; she brought him to me. She'd taught him the Kings of Israel, and I asked him how long our dyke was and he didn't know."

"He was ten," said Eva.

"Oh, they've blabbed, have they? Yes, I was rude to her. I tell you, I like being rude. I wish I could be rude oftener to your father. Why doesn't he join some local board I'm on? I'm on all. A great man and a rich man should govern, especially in our day. Well, I hear Rutger is a good burgomaster. Too compassionate; that's nonsense. The poor need neither compassion nor passion from us, but government. Look here! Rutger's not to know. You must promise me—quite unconditionally. Do you hear?"

"I promise," she said.

He looked round at her—a cruel look. "A woman's promise—will you keep it?"

"I will keep it," she said.

The tall trees rose around them; the place was very quiet.

"Good. You have made a fool of me. I have always disliked the happy Melissants. I am old." He mumbled on, striking again, aimlessly, at an iron-black trunk.

"My wife promised; she didn't keep it. She lived on; I hated her." Suddenly he stood still. They had emerged into a small clearing; the road shimmered, a dull riband in the sinking light.

"Yon's your way," he said, pointing. "I'll do it because your name's Knoppe. Good-night!"

"It is," she replied. "So is his."

She had gone several yards before he recalled her, peremptorily, almost as if she had been the dog. He thrust a paper out to her; it was a banknote. "Buy a mug," he said, "or something, for it when it comes." He fled into the dusk; the great Dane rustled after him through the bronzed undergrowth.

She remained, bewildered and perplexed, the scrap of paper in her hands. She pushed it hurriedly into her bosom. Her husband was coming out of the heavy gloaming up the quiet road.

"Eva," he said, "for Heaven's sake, why are you here?" The police-dog Sherlock glowered beside him.

"I went for a walk. It's a beautiful evening."

"But why here? We never come up this road."

"I came up it because I liked it," she stammered, confused.

"You have been to my uncle Knoppe. You have been to ask him to help me. He has refused." The words rushed out, falling over each other in the eagerness of his wrath.

"If you know all that I needn't tell you," she answered. "I acted for the best."

"I know it; why else should you be here? Of course he has refused?"

They walked on. It was long before he said: "You might have spared me this unutterable humiliation. You can't think what it signifies. But, as you say, you meant well. I—I don't mind much. I—I wish you had talked about him a bit—felt your way. It can't be helped. Let's forget. It's a lovely evening."

"I am sorry," she said. Her woman's tact told her

it was best, at this moment, to leave the banknote untouched.

A couple of days later they went back to Skilda.

"Why hang on?" said Rutger. "The thing's a failure. Let's go and shoot."

"What has happened between Rutger and Eva?" queried Mevrouw Melissant anxiously, arranging aster-dahlias, big as rainbow-coloured chimney brooms, in a yawning vase.

"Oh, some little tiff," replied her husband. "They'll be all the fonder over it at Skilda. You remember what the song says—a music-hall ditty, isn't it?

'Why, bless me, there's a falling out
That all the more endears.'

"It's quite true, as you and I have found—in earliest days."

"Only when you flirted almost just beyond your limit," replied Mevrouw Melissant.

CHAPTER XXI

"A LIBRARY!" said everybody all over Skilda and Volda at the same time. The much discussed "Tobacco scheme"—mere material welfare—sunk into insignificance compared with this intellectual onslaught.

"The Bible for me!" said the most influential church-warden of Skilda. Father Bredo waited to see that the Bible be excluded. All the Protestants were curious, all the Catholics were anxious, to learn the opinion of their spiritual guide.

Mevrouw Dickert gave in her momentous adhesion, dependent on the inclusion in the catalogue of half a dozen especially foolish but equally harmless love tales that had been recommended to her by her widespread circle of rather foolish friends. She brought the list to Eva and talked about culture for an hour and a half. "I love intellectuality," she said. "Oh, I love intellectuality. It raises." The sentiment pleased her, and she henceforth repeated it, even as far as Kykstad, in unstinted laudation of Eva's project. Only they who have not lived in a country neighbourhood can underestimate the importance of Mevrouw Dickert's patronage. Eva counted it as nought. In sheer kindness she bought the books.

She was rewarded by a presentation copy of the Dominé's volume on the cuneiform inscriptions of Dar-es-Salak, in which he proved to his own satisfaction that a cuneiform inscription need not necessarily be cuneiform. The library was progressing splendidly; the Dominé's work was already number 111.

Immediately afterwards the Baroness Bigi sent several dozen moral publications; they were rather controversial and old-fashioned; too many drunken

parents found themselves reformed by sick and saintly children, but they constituted a useful contrast with Melissant's tales of scalping and piracy, and the six volumes of dry history that Rutger had bought. The Freule Lexma shook her kind old head. "In my youth," she said, "none of our servants could read. So they used their brains for their work." She explained this to the youngest Freulé Bigi, who had come to stay with her, and Margot Bigi replied, thoughtfully, that every period had its advantages, but you couldn't help the world moving on. "Moving on is the word," said the Freule Lexma. "Do you call it 'progressing'?" The Freule Bigi said, "Perhaps not."

Melissant came to shoot early in December. He found things running very smoothly as he wrote home. The weather was dark but dry; the birds were neither too wild nor too tame; Rutger seemed considerate to Eva, and Eva seemed occupied with her baby-linen and her books. Her book she had abandoned, speaking of it to no one, after her experience with Victor Hugo and Cissie Brent. "Come and sit with me, father, and talk nonsense," she said.

Melissant agreed. "I *can't* keep up the strain of politics with Rutger," he gasped. "My dear child, you really will *have* to find out the difference between Conservatives and Liberals; I wish I could help you. There *must* be a difference; at least, before either's in power?"

"Yes,' sighed Eva. "If I knew whom to ask! Aunt Imka only knows that the people oughtn't to vote. We haven't learnt anything about politics or religion."

"Don't praise me to my face," replied Melissant. "This new room of yours is delightful! It's the only nice room in the house."

"I am still afraid of it," said Eva. "It fascinates me, and I am afraid of it. It's no use talking about these things, but I feel as if something dreadful had happened in it—long ago, or would happen again. The

woodwork knows. Look at its black grin! You feel it in the room, when you're alone!"

"I don't feel it." Melissant lit a cigarette. "Look here, child, you needn't overdo my advice about the romance! Confine that to the living—'your Adam,' as mother says. Of course somebody's died in an old room like this! And probably various people have been born in it. They weren't friends of ours."

Eva bent over the flannel she was festooning. "Nobody'd ever died at Sans-Souci. And none of the rooms looked as if they'd seen some horrible secret, some terrible sin!"

"That's a very proper filial sentiment," said Melissant, kicking at the logs upon the hearth. It was true that the polished wainscoting twinkled spectrally, under the low smoked ceiling, across the black rugs of the shiny floor.

"Don't burn your boots, father!"

"Eva, I rejoice to see that romancing has not killed economy. I admit it: this neighbourhood has little charm. It is too prosperous and too well-intentioned. The population is as flat and fruitful as the country-side. The duties, like the beauties, are evidently plain." He stood smiling at his distorted face in the rounded oak. "I asked your parson for a few statistics that caught my fancy—mere curiosity!—painful statistics you wouldn't care about, but he didn't know. I understood him to say the place was full of godliness and great gain and—no wonder!—contentment! Is that likely? So much the better. I'm afraid your parson's a fossil."

Eva looked up. "We possess one beauty," she remarked. "Exquisite—I say no more. I must take you there."

"A beauty? Where? When?"

"After lunch, if you like. We must motor to Volda." It amused her to see how inquisitive he was, like a child. He had an absurd French book with him; he

read snatches out of it to her; she escaped downstairs to arrange about the car.

Face to face with the beauty at Volda, Melissant muttered "A church!"; but he entered and was amiable to Father Bredo.

"You mustn't trouble to explain too much to me, because I understand nothing," he said, "I know little of art and still less of churches. I have always striven to enjoy beauties without finding out too much about them. If you are too good a connoisseur, the beauties you want to think ancient prove modern, and the beauties you believed to be younger prove old!" Father Bredo gravely did the honours of the sacred edifice; he had not taken kindly to Mynheer Melissant. It was only at Eva's special request that he grudgingly unfastened the Madonna.

"Beautiful!" said Melissant. He turned away, however, rather abruptly, and found himself confronted by the slouching sacristan. "Ah!" he said.

"Hermus, my verger. He is deaf and dumb."

"I am so glad. I mean, that he didn't hear me. It was stupid, but he startled me, in your twilight. He is certainly not one of the beauties of your church."

"He is the fashioner of many of them," said the serious Father."

"Lucus a non lucendo. Well, Eva, we must be going."

Eva waited by the priest. "Your people do not come to my library," she said.

"Mevrouw, I am sorry. My people cannot read books of which the Church has not approved."

"But how do you mean 'approved'?—do you mean that every volume must be stamped?"

"If it comes to that—yes."

"Well, then, won't you come and stamp?"

He looked uncomfortable. "Reading is so supremely important a factor. We prefer to keep these things to ourselves."

She took leave, vexed. The visit had not been a success.

"A beauty!" grumbled Melissant, as they drove off. "I thought it was a live one!"

"Father—at your age! You ought to be ashamed of yourself."

"I am—often. In homœopathic doses the sentiment is wholesome. But a church! Oh, of course, it's very fine. And that hideous, creepy creature! I fear he read my countenance, if he didn't hear my voice!"

"Surely the building is beautiful!"

"I suppose so. It's a pity such fine material should be wasted on these mummeries. And I didn't take to your bull-faced priest. He'd gladly burn me, if he could. Let's have tea with Freule Imka; that'll quite take away the taste"—he corrected himself with an ugly laugh—"the smell!"

"Don't, father, oh, don't! It's a religion! You can't mean it!"

"I do. To me it's a religion of hate, and therefore I hate it. My dear Eva, you can't expect me to sympathise with that! We're miles apart. By-the-bye, I rather agree with Rutger: that girl Bigi looks fine."

At dinner he repeated these two impressions to his son-in-law. "Her neck's long, but there's blood in its twist," he said. "I hope to be cremated, but I object to being burnt."

"Eva likes an excuse for going there," answered Rutger, nodding amiably to his wife. "She has a theory that the people are more friendly."

"The priest wasn't too friendly," said Melissant. "Eva, why did he open that doll with the same doll inside?"

The hot blood rushed to her cheeks. "Don't!" she pleaded again. "I fear that he felt—oh, never mind. Yes, I love going there. It's our one beautiful thing. I wish I hadn't taken you, father! At home you've got your pictures and——"

"Ours are at Randik," said Rutger.

"I meant the shows. Of course they don't under-

stand liberty as we do. Fancy, Rutger, they mayn't read a single book that their priest hasn't stamped."

"Well, there's far too much reading," replied Rutger, captiously, somewhat flustered by her extreme agitation. "We shall have your prairie-boys holding up Aunt Imka on her drives."

"Father's prairie-boys!" corrected Eva, making the best of it. "And Mevrouw Bigi's little reformers will induce you to sign the pledge." But she felt forlorn, all the same, about her library. Only Mevrouw Dickert "looked in," through long mornings, to discuss utterly unsuitable additions, for which Melissant might pay.

The latter, having shot what seemed shootable, departed to larger coverts and sent Mevrouw Melissant to mother their daughter. "I have no religion," he said in going. "I have only a vague superstition about fate. I hope it won't be born on a Friday, Rutger. I don't think I can wish you anything else."

Eva looked up, quickly, from husband to parent. "Father!" she exclaimed, with a burst of pent-up feeling. "Don't you exaggerate your prejudice against religion? Doesn't Rutger exaggerate his prejudice against finance?"

Melissant nodded carelessly to her. "Grown-up children always think their parents exaggerate their prejudices," he said. "Rutger must answer for himself!"

"You must take me with my prejudices," smiled Rutger. "It's so difficult to distinguish prejudices from principle."

"Not in other people," said Melissant.

Eva turned to the window, suddenly thoughtful beyond her years.

Mevrouw Melissant brought a whole boxful of orchids from Sans-Souci. She had never seen anything so black and dull and barren as the December deadness of the Skilda fields. So she said to her daughter: "What lovely clouds!"

"It's bitterly cold. It's going to snow," replied Eva.

"Yes, it's cold," the elder woman shivered as she drew her sables around her. "Much colder than with us. Are those the tobacco fields?"

"There are no tobacco fields. I've heard nothing more about it—the scheme failed, and Rutger doesn't like me to ask."

"Oh! I am sorry for Udo Gallas. I had heard he was coming back. People out there wrote that he was charming."

"Really? Like his sister, perhaps. Everybody likes Celia."

"Yes, she is a great acquisition. One can see that they have lived much abroad. By-the-bye, Bessie's engagement is broken off."

"Why? When?"

"At 'Santa Claus'. The brute sent her a ginger-bread sweetheart all over gilt. He must have heard something she said about his gold. But they're very thankful, for it appears that he'd never been baptised."

"I have given up Bessie—in my heart," said Eva gently. "I am glad he heard, whatever he may have been."

"That isn't kind of you. We women are always so unkind about each other. Ah, there is the new house of Freule Lexma! Does she like it?"

"Yes, she likes it, because it isn't damp. She has now lived in it nearly half a year."

"It would be too bad if it was damp as well," said Mevrouw Melissant, alighting from the motor. She greeted Rutger, and said he looked well. Which was quite true. She said Sherlock looked friendly.

"At my age," she explained to Eva, in the late stillness of her bedroom, "one must learn to see the bright side of things that haven't got any. Then it develops: that's Darwin. Even in a horrid disease."

"Why, mother, you never used to mention disease: this sounds like last summer."

Mevrouw Melissant sat down and began to weep

quietly. "I'm better now," she said, wiping her eyes. "It's unreasonable of me, because I'd decided to spare you and tell Marthe. Only Marthe has got beyond me. She has such queer fits of ill-temper, and I don't understand ill-temper, never did."

Eva had put her arm round her mother's neck, close beside her, on the big couch. "Tell me all," she said.

"It isn't really so very bad, Eva. I'm selfish, and absurd. But the doctors have found out about my tiredness. I'm rather glad. It's come out, you see—not really clever! It's rheumatic gout, and it's got into the joints: it's going to stay there." Her voice shook.

"No, not going to stay!" To Eva the thought came as a novelty she could not assimilate—one of "the Children" ill!

"It is, dear, or I shouldn't have mentioned it. My father had it, so I know. It's the chalky kind that stiffens; your hands"—she spread out her ten shapely fingers—"get to look like old roots." She laughed a little. "At last you can't move. But it takes a long time."

"Something must be done," said Eva, bewildered.

Mevrouw Melissant shook her head. "No, I won't do anything. I shall wait, and enjoy myself, and not bother my poor family! I am warned by my poor father's experience, a few years of wretchedness in all sorts of horrible health holes: baths, rubbers, medical and other quacks, and the swellings creeping up just the same. He had every opportunity of measuring them, with doctors and nurses examining them all day. Two years of no-meat with an English doctor, two years of all-meat with an Italian one! No. I shall dine and dance till I can't. You know how active I've always been: and yet here's this arthritis, which they all ascribe to sedimentary—no, that's not the word—sedentary habits! There, it's cheered me up to tell you, though I know it was very selfish. Poor old Charlie always used to complain to me of his cramps. I've ten years to the good, with a little will-power! Look, my wrist's thick, but that'll go down."

"Rutger must rub it," said Eva. "You remember about my sprain? People come to him daily."

"I don't mind his rubbing. But I refuse to have a treatment. Better to die, says the Bible, than always live in fear of death."

"That's a quotation from father, when he jumps a big fence," said Eva.

"Yes, all my quotations come viâ your father. He is wonderfully well-read for a man who never reads anything. Well, mine's a sort of jump! I'm quite sure I'm right, Eva. It's the not-wanting-to makes us wretched. You can't be really unhappy if you live your life as it comes."

CHAPTER XXII

MEVROUW MELISSANT woke up delighted with the idea of being temporarily cured by her son-in-law. "We must apply at his office," she laughed, "or it won't work. I must put on a black shawl and say 'Heer Burgomaster': suggestion is half the remedy. It'll feel like touching for the King's Evil. What fun!" She insisted on carrying out this project after her late cup of tea in bed. "I am ready," she said. "Oh, dear me, what snow!"

"Yes, there's heaps on the ground, and heaps in the air," answered Eva. "You're sure you want to struggle through?"

"Of course: snow's fun! Oh, I don't mind damp. Damp's no harm, if you don't find it damping. Let's start!"

Little surprise parties have a way of twisting awry. When the two ladies, bedraggled and persistent, blew through the unlatched office-door, halfway between the house and the village, they were met with a cry from Rutger in which protest rose uppermost. He came hurriedly towards them, both arms extended, warding them off. "Oh, get away! Get away!"

"My dear Rutger!" remonstrated Mevrouw Melissant, her damp face a-ripple. "I mean, oh Mynheer Burgomaster, we've come all the way in the snow,—a poor suffering woman who wants your Nobleness——"

"Go away, for Heaven's sake!" exclaimed Rutger, exasperated. He pointed to a side-door. "In there, if you like!" Eva had glanced round the familiar bare ante-chamber; a peasant, inobservant, crouched in the far corner, a sick child on his knee. Before she could

say anything, her husband had swept her into his private room. Mevrouw Melissant followed.

"That child has got measles—bad," breathed Rutger, turning on the two women. "The fool's brought it to me: they can't distinguish or they won't: I cost nothing. Why did you come here, Eva? You must go away—go home at once."

"Poor little thing, in this weather!" said Eva. "Rutger, they must get a fly——"

"I know," interrupted Rutger, impatiently. "But you've got to hurry back home. There's a lot of measles in the village, broken out suddenly these last days. I didn't want to alarm you. It's a bad kind, and measles are most infectious before the patient feels he's got them."

"Then this child isn't infectious. "Can't we——?"

"You can go home," said Rutger, peremptorily. "I've sent for a fly and the doctor—if he's anywhere near."

"As you choose," replied Eva, and walked out into the road again. To her mother she said, turning towards the village:

"No, not as he chooses."

"What is it, Eva?"

"I am going on to my library. It's the day: he might have remembered, only he doesn't care. Many of the children have come two or three miles through the snow."

"Couldn't you depute somebody?"

"Only Mevrouw Dickert. I did once. She gave the youngest children books for mothers, and the older ones her own love-stories. Sometimes I think she isn't right in her mind."

"Of course he wants you not to——"

"Oh, he always wants me not to. It's kind of him, but he thinks I'm to be nursed like a baby, just because he's older than I."

"Still, my dear Eva, it certainly is snowing hard, and your boots are very wet."

"But they also are very thick, like yours. And the children's boots are wetter, and thin."

Mevrouw Melissant panted after her daughter.

"Well, you know my opinion," she admitted. "I expressed it last night, so I can't contradict it. *I* couldn't zigzag between all the pitfalls of existence. I simply couldn't do it! Please your neighbour and yourself's my motto! Straight ahead!"

"Quite so," said Eva, pushing forward with her recalcitrant umbrella. "But I do wish the wind was the other way."

Mevrouw Melissant found herself amply rewarded for the brief tussle villagewards by the sight of the waiting children, red-cheeked, damp-cheeked, eyes on the alert. It was vastly amusing to mark their eager interest in each other's selections, to hear their requirements for the future, their verdicts on the past. "Look here, ma'am!" A very small boy nudged Mevrouw Melissant, in a tone of aggrieved remonstrance—"This book says I oughter love my enemies. *I* ain't going to love my enemies. *I*'m going to whop Jop!" Mevrouw Melissant returned jubilant; she only regretted that she could not recount to her son-in-law this little tale of Eva's difficulties: it must be kept till she saw Lourens, for she was as lazy a letter-writer as her husband. Meanwhile she placed her hand in Rutger's, and that specialist willingly, though not very hopefully, rubbed it.

Otherwise Rutger's mood also was jubilant, for so reserved a temperament, during the ensuing week. Despite the ravages, in both parishes, of that most insidious epidemic, the measles, he hinted at good tidings, on the tip of his tongue. And one morning he entered with them written on his brow. The Freule Imka checked the seventeenth century anecdote of her youth to which Mevrouw Melissant was courteously listening, reminiscent of brighter episodes in her own more recent experience, whilst Eva lay languidly indifferent on a couch.

"The money is found!" he exulted. "Gallas will be here before Christmas. We shall begin work with the steam-plough as soon as the snow is gone." He looked out of the window and to Eva's amazement, and amusement, he said: "Damn the snow!"

"Rutger!" exclaimed the Freule, "Mevrouw Melissant will be shocked!"

"What about?" exclaimed that lady. She admired the man for caring so much.

"And Eva?"—he looked at her. "You care also. Why don't you say something?"

She wearily put her hand to her aching forehead: for some days she had dragged herself on from one small duty to the next. "Indeed I care," she said. "It is such a surprise. I thought the idea was abandoned." He read the reproach.

"I didn't want to bother you," he said. "And I thought it was better to manage it first—by myself." There was more reproach, unintended, in his reply. Her motive in secretly going to his uncle had been excellent—oh, of course motives were excellent—could you expect them to be anything else? But a woman shouldn't initiate, only sympathise. He had unwittingly punished her by not telling secrets she couldn't keep.

"So the rumour about young Gallas was true," hastily put in Mevrouw Melissant. "We heard he had left Sumatra. His sister Celia admitted that."

"Correspondence takes so long. In the end we had to cable twice. Meanwhile the father found the money."

So Celia knew he was cabling, reflected Eva. Mevrouw Melissant said: "Can the father find money?" Quick-witted, she felt angry with her son-in-law, with his smiling grand-aunt. How few men know how to manage a woman, she thought, but it's mostly the fault of the other women they knew.

"Business men can always find money for a good thing," replied Rutger. "I fancy it's Aansmeer, your friend Bessie's father. He refused to do it direct. He's rich enough, isn't he, Eva?"

"Yes, he's rich enough; he could easily do it," said Eva.

"Well, his terms are hard—not such as I should have wished—but the money's there at last; we can begin; hooray! Bless me, there's the Bigi!"

"Is it: let me see!"—Mevrouw Melissant rose as lightly as her knee, stiff from the snow, would allow—"Mules? Oh, I don't care for mules: they are like electro-plate, always recalling the real thing and never quite the right shape. Look at that near one, Freule: isn't it just like a tin horse, that's begun melting?"

"I know nothing about horses," said the venerable Freule, "except that mine, having twice as many legs as I have, can go twice as far and twice as fast."

"I love horses: I have always ridden——" but here the Dowager, attended by Constantia and Marcella, sailed in.

"I have come straight to you, Mynheer Knoppe," she said. "Our schoolmaster says we are not to have our Christmas treats: why not, pray?"

"Well, there's so much illness!"

"Nonsense! Absurd! Girls, I told you so. There's always illness. Next year it'll be influenza. You don't mean to say, you think any child'll catch it that isn't predestined or predisposed?"

"Predestined," echoed Constantia, who was deeply religious. Marcella, who was scientific, echoed "Predisposed."

"Don't you agree with me?" continued the Dowager to "Mevrouw Burgomaster."

"Why do they let it spread?" replied Eva, exasperated by her sick-headache. "Why don't the Government stamp it out, like foot and mouth disease, at the start?"

"There is only one difficulty," said the Bigi. "Their souls." "Yes, that is the only serious objection," complacently remarked the Bigi.

"Now, I have often wondered," opined the Freule Lexma, reflecting aloud, "if it would not have been

better, had not quite all this quantity of human beings had souls? If, for instance, the souls had begun with the upper middle-class?"

Mevrouw Melissant, very indignant at heart, exclaimed laughing: "Why, you're a Darwinian!"

"An Arminian! Indeed not!" replied the more indignant Freule. "I abhor Dissenters. Not that I ever met any."

"Unknown is unloved, as the Proverb says," declared the Bigi, already rising, always restive. "We should all embrace our fellow-sheep, whatever their fold. Well, Burgomaster, I shall expect to have my Christmas tree. Mevrouw Melissant, I notice that your wrist is swollen; I must send you some of my 'Abram's Occasion,' as my coachman calls it. I have never known it to fail with my daughters or my mules!"

The mules had not yet tinkled into the silence, when Eva staggered erect. "I must go upstairs," she said. "I can hold out no longer. I am ill."

They cried out in a pleased flutter. They deemed her at the door of life. But it was death's door. She lingered there for three weeks; the old year dwindled into the new. Her mother, however well-intentioned, was useless, too ignorant of nursing. The universal epidemic caused a dearth of proper "sisters": Margot Bigi, who had gone in for a diploma, quietly took possession of the sick-chamber. Rutger, in the general distraction, expressed less than half the gratitude he felt. The measles left Eva weak and disappointed. Her child was still-born.

CHAPTER XXIII

IN the long silence of a winter-convalescence Eva had full occasion to realise the hush that had befallen her existence. The empty outlook, the soul's dearth. Nothing was left of the sunshine and soul-scenery of Sans-Souci. She put off her sick-chamber clothing. She went downstairs and kissed her husband tenderly on each cheek.

She found the little downstairs circle enlarged. Udo Gallas had a seat in council, next to Sherlock. The talk was of tobacco.

"He *does* know about tobacco!" declared Rutger. "George!—he scents it as Sherlock scents a tramp. Or aunt Imka a 'Modern.' I fear Gallas is a bit modern for Aunt Imka!"

Eva glanced at the new arrival. He was not seventeenth century; his clothes and appearance at once suggested Nieburg, not Kykstad. Life in France and the tropics had darkened his complexion and refined his features. He shared his sister's desire to be agreeable, the caress of her voice and of her gaze.

"You must tell me all about Celia," suggested Eva.

"Must I? I'd much rather talk about the new, diverting people I've met here."

"Ah, yes—diverting," said Eva. "You found them diverting? Wherein do they specially di-vert?"

"Most of all, I should say, in all taking themselves so seriously. Don't you think everybody's funny when he specially thinks he's not?"

"How you must have enjoyed the East!" said Eva. "Orientals, they say, never feel absurd."

"Oh, no, the East was altogether too Eastern for me," replied Gallas, patting the irresponsive Sherlock.

"I am of the West. It's a good thing Mynheer Knoppe sent for me, or an ounce of ashes would have arrived one morning at my father's, by post."

"Why?" demanded Rutger, looking up from a chart, full of figures.

"The East would have burnt me up. Don't let's talk of it. Skilda is mild."

Eva changed the subject. "You saw Theo Brent there? Cissie is my friend."

"Yes, we gave his ship a warm welcome. He didn't look scorched—a dull chap for a middy!"

"Oh, what makes you say so? We thought him too excitable. What can have changed him?" Eva tried to keep down the vague disquiet in her voice.

"Perhaps he's left his heart here: he didn't confide in me," laughed Gallas. "Just the sort of thing these stupid children go and do."

"Yes: he's about my age." Eva laughed also. Gallas examined her. She was girlish: still, Theo Brent must be under twenty. Gallas was old, twenty-eight. He turned to his "Chief." "Shall I get you that report I was speaking of?" They began to talk tobacco again.

"Eva, you know it *is* jolly," said Rutger, "to speak with a man who knows such heaps about one subject. Especially if it's the subject you want to know heaps about."

"Till now we had 'the Rabbi,'" said Eva.

"Well—yes. Babylon don't appeal to me, like tobacco. It's so long since the ruins left off smoking. You might laugh, Eva!"

"I did laugh!" said Eva quickly. "Didn't you hear me?"

"'The Rabbi's' good enough," continued Rutger good-naturedly. "When a man knows as little as I do, he always likes to listen to as clever a chap as 'the Rabbi.'"

"How different you are from us!" said Eva, from the bottom of her heart. "At Sans-Souci we never

care for information on any subject. My father always says: 'I know nothing: most people know most things wrong.'"

Rutger laughed, his big, friendly laugh. "That's right enough," he said. "But of course it isn't, for the whole world'd just stand still, if it couldn't go on wrong!"

He strode a few paces down the room, as was his habit. "Work!" he said, doggedly. "Anyone can avoid mistakes by doing nothing. But, George!—in the end that's the biggest mistake of all."

Eva lay back on her couch. She felt ashamed to recall so vividly her light-hearted father's comments on the fools who daren't enjoy life, for eagerness to employ it. Why strain after more money or honour when you've already enough?

"True," she said, "Mevrouw Dickert is coming to report about the library. I've heard nothing since I fell ill."

"Mevrouw Dickert!" Rutger fled.

Not too soon, for the parson's wife kept him many minutes on the doorstep, whilst she expressed, for the twentieth time, her unfelt and unappreciated sympathy. Mevrouw Dickert had small children of her own. Her interest in these was restricted to their appearance. The Dominé took no interest in them: they were too recent.

"Oh, my dear Mevrouw Burgomaster!" screamed Mevrouw Dickert. She always screamed to the sick, under the impression that you should speak up. "Oh, my dear Mevrouw Burgomaster! Oh!"

"Quite so," replied Eva, welcoming her only "friend" in the village.

"Exactly what I said: only Solomon wouldn't listen. He's full of some ridiculous new tablet that says the world wasn't created till after the Flood. As if it mattered *when* the world was created, considering we're here! And, Flood or no Flood, say I, thank goodness we've had plenty of time to dry. Let bygones be

bygones; but I do like to see a rainbow, all the same!"

"Remember, he married you because of the interest you expressed in his studies: you've told me so many a time."

Mevrouw Dickert flashed a wicked little flash from her wicked little eyes at Mevrouw Burgomaster. "You'll have to take a lot of interest in tobacco, my dear Mevrouw," she said.

"I shall be only too glad to take an interest in anything," said Eva.

Mevrouw Dickert melted. "There's the library," she said. "And your piano. Don't, for Heaven's sake, go interfering with the parish poor!"

"You mean, because I sent that baby-linen to that poor girl? I've plenty left."

"Keep it for the future! You've outraged all the married women, who never got any. Forgive my speaking plainly, dear Mevrouw Burgomaster! The relieving officer feels it—strongly. The poor must be left to those who understand their tricks."

"They all have tricks?" sighed Eva.

"All. I never concern myself with them. The Freule Imka did once, and what came of it? Subscribe! As your husband does. And your most charming papa!"

"You like my father?" said Eva, with a sudden gush of pleasure.

"He's under fifty," replied Mevrouw Dickert, simpering. "He told me so. I never say I like a man that's under fifty. *I* understand my position as a clergyman's wife. Some women——"

"Of course he's under fifty," interrupted Eva, cooling. "You were going to speak about the library. You have been most kind to take care of it all this time!"

"It's a boon!" cried Mevrouw Dickert, firing the word aloft as if it had been a rocket, and flinging her eyes after it, as if to see it come down. "In this dull

place! This dull winter! And so Solomon'd have told her, had he had the pluck of a flea!"

"Told whom?" asked Eva. "A flea has more pluck than any of us. Look what lengths he goes!"

"I beg your pardon?" Mevrouw Dickert arched her eyebrows.

"My mistake," answered Eva penitently. "But who was the censorious she? Not, I hope, dear Aunt Imka?"

"No, indeed. If we were all as easy-going as the Freule we should all look twenty years younger than we are, as the Freule does."

"I don't think that would be quite pleasant," said Eva.

"You wilfully misunderstand me, Mevrouw Burgomaster!" said Selena Dickert, much annoyed. In fact she detested this fine lady from Nieburg. "I don't believe the Freule thinks anything matters, since the world went wrong, anyhow, two hundred years ago."

"Oh, many of us'd like to have lived earlier. The Dominé, for instance, in Nebuchadnezzar's time!"

"Now *there* you are *quite* mistaken, Mevrouw Burgomaster! There'd have been no old stones to discover, when everything'd only just been built. It was the Dowager Bigi, the Freule Margot's mother, who came to see the library, and used language I wouldn't demean myself to repeat. Language such as only the Pulpit can permit itself, because there, of course, we all know that it's symbolical."

"Forgive me: I only laughed because you mentioned Mevrouw Bigi!" answered Eva. "I know I oughtn't to. Has Mynheer Gallas seen her yet? I believe he is some connection."

"Why? What makes you think of Mynheer Gallas?" Again the wicked flash flashed across Mevrouw Dickert's mean little eyes.

"He spoke of queer people he had met."

"He has seen a great deal of us. He is a very

cultivated man. He also is a boon, in Skilda. His advice—about the library—has been inestimable. It wouldn't suit the Baroness!" Mevrouw Dickert bent over the sofa, diminutive, confidential, but always shrill. "She is almost illiterate. Mynheer Gallas made me get the hundred best plays at ten cents per volume. I asked *her* to give us the hundred best books, and she said the hundred best books was the Bible!"

"The hundred best books is an absurdity anyhow," remarked Eva.

"I said that was silly," continued Mevrouw Dickert, not heeding. "She overheard me and thought I meant the Bible. So she went straight and complained to poor Solomon. She said I was something out of the Revelation."

"I am sure the Dominé objected to that," replied Eva.

"The Dominé isn't interested in the Revelation. He doesn't care, you see, about the Babylons of the future! And he says the books in old Babylon were bricks—a brick to a page—so the Sunday School children couldn't have taken them home!" Mevrouw Dickert leant back in her big chair, folded her little arms over her little waist, and smiled.

"But you must have spent all Aunt Imka's tatting money on those plays!" objected Eva, terror-struck. "And it was the Dowager's money; *she'd* bought the tatting!" Eva laughed.

"Well, the old lady'll tatt more. I saw her venerable head at the window. Tatt!" Mevrouw Dickert kicked up, from her high hassock, the little feet of which she was so justly proud.

"Everybody likes the plays," she went on. "From my husband, who read 'Sardanapalus' to the vet's wife, who devoured 'The Doll's House.' They all knew the books—more or less—but the plays are a new thing altogether. Nobody's ever been inside a play-house. I haven't. Nobody has!"

"Never been inside a—true, there isn't one at Kykstad."

"Gallas—Mynheer Gallas understood at once. 'You want something that'll make you live,' he said. 'You vegetate.' Your Aunt Imka didn't catch his meaning, she said she'd always eaten meat once a day!" Mevrouw Dickert rose to depart. "It's a weary world," she said. "Full of misunderstandings. But the library is getting on first-rate. It's for all of us, as you've often said, not only the school-children. There's farces in the hundred best plays'll make you sick with laughing. I'm delighted to see you looking so well. My melancholia has been troubling me again. And no wonder, in this dull hole, with my aspirations. As your papa said, I ought to adorn—he was good enough to say adorn—a town!"

Eva, left alone, sat contemplating the door through which her only friend had passed and wondered which of the hundred plays had given the parson's wife most satisfaction.

Meanwhile Rutger, returning from a wearisome round of vestry-duties, through a damp steam of dirty snow, happened on a couple of scuffling, screaming urchins such as Authority must, however unwillingly, separate. He picked off the top child, and placed it, right side up, in the road. "What does this mean?" he demanded.

"I did it—did it—did it," replied the ruffled, rumpled child.

"So I see." The burgomaster's gaze dropped, with measured pity, to the bigger, blubbering booby in the puddle. "Why?"

"I said I would," crowed, from under blood and tears, the youthful hero. "I'd dirty his clothes and get *him* thrashed too: I told the lady I would. Weeks ago!"

"Did the lady ask you to? What lady?" questioned Rutger gaily.

The boy squeaked. "No!" he sniffed. "I told her I'd whop Jop." The lady what came to the library—with Mevrouw Burgomaster- -the lady with the yellow

curls over her eyes! She said I must love my enemies, but I told her I'd whop Jop."

"Well, now you've done it, let him alone," admonished Rutger. He walked on, assimilating, as best he could, the cruel information he had so lightly received. At the Freule Lexma's door he stopped, for a chat with the Freule Margot Bigi.

"You are leaving to-morrow?" he said.

"Yes—I have been here more than a month." The Freule Margot was tall and gentle, willowy, with an unbending conviction that her right is right.

"I shall miss our talks. I cannot tell you what a help you have been, after Mevrouw Melissant had to go back for her New Year's parties. She had four that week."

"Yes, she couldn't put them off. I have so few parties. And dear Eva was much better. Now, she is quite her old self again. She can resume all her occupations."

"Yes," said Rutger, suddenly wondering what these were. "So can you."

"My sisters have taken my place. But of course we all have our tasks. Mamma quite understood I was needed here."

"I have noticed that you are devoted to your mother."

"It is she who is devoted!" cried the Freule Margot. "She is absolutely perfect, in unselfishness and judiciousness—and every other virtue. There is no one like mamma! The longer one lives with her, the more perfect one feels her to be."

Rutger stood against the little gate. "Well, our talks have been the one bright bit in these dark days. We have so many friends in common too. We should be sure to find out, if we looked, that we are related. Mutual friends make pleasant conversation. Do you know, fond as my wife and I are of one another, we sometimes don't know what to talk about!" He looked towards her, in surprise.

"Why don't you interest her in the village poor?" said Margot boldly.

"Did I ever tell you about Aunt Imka," was his reply. "Well, I must then, in self-defence. Aunt Imka, when she first came here, tried once, dear soul! For my sake as always. She said the poor had the parson and the Bible-woman, and the nurse, and she couldn't give them advice, but she could give them cordials. And one evening when I was out, a woman came to the door for a bottle of brandy, so her husband, who was a reformed drunkard, fell into the ditch."

"And was drowned!" said Margot Bigi, aghast.

"Oh no: this is a true story, not a temperance tract. But the people who pulled him out said it was all my fault, for they finished what was left of my brandy, and they said it tasted of heaven!"

"Dear Eva can begin earlier: she is young," said the Freule Bigi.

"She is," replied Rutger, wondering whether Margot, who was over thirty, was twenty-six or twenty-eight. "But she hasn't got it in her. She hasn't been fortunate in her beginnings. How could she, with her up-bringing? Not that I want her to bother with the poor! You knew where she caught her measles."

"Yes. I knew."

"Why didn't you speak of it?"

"Why should I? It's a painful subject. Dear mamma has taught us not to believe in catchings. It's dispensations."

"Well, I could easily dispense with all this novel-reading. I've only read a couple of story-books myself, and they've carried me through life. I suppose you know 'David Copperfield'?"

Margot coloured slightly. "Mamma thought better I should wait," she said. "There's a young person in it, I believe, who—who doesn't act nicely."

"Oh yes, of course. Peggotty's my hero, though! He's ripping: it's the only word. Well, goodbye again! And thanks again! Life's difficult. I wish Eva hadn't gone to the library!"

"Difficult? Do you find it so?" said the Freule

Bigi sweetly. "Please don't. To me the English language has always seemed the most beautiful that's ever existed. I am sure it must be—do you know why? Because in English 'beauty' rhymes with 'duty': isn't that a wonderful thought?"

"Yes. I read 'David Copperfield' in Dutch, though."

"But—" she bent nervously across the gate. "I do agree with you about the reading. I am glad you spoke of it. You give me courage. There should be more selection, Mynheer Knoppe—more careful—really, really, there should be that! All these plays, now; surely that's wrong!"

"Plays?" said Rutger.

"Yes—haven't you heard about the veterinary surgeon's wife?"

"No, what?"

The Freule Lexma had come out, wrapped in her fur mantle. "Go away, Rutger. It's time for my walk!"

"But the vet's wife, Aunt Imka?"

"Left her home exactly an hour ago, and a letter for her husband, saying she was tired of hearing how he cured cows, and he wouldn't let her live her life. My maid had it from her maid, round the corner."

"But how does she mean—live her life?" demanded the puzzled Rutger.

"It's out of a play—a woman whose husband wouldn't allow her to eat macaroons," explained Margot.

"No doctor would," said Freule Imka. "It's cruelly hard on the vet."

"I think I'll go home. I *must* stop this library," answered Rutger. He flew along in the snow and slush. A couple of peasants crossed his path: he avoided them. For the first time of his official career at Skilda he felt afraid, and alarmed.

CHAPTEK XXIV

He burst in upon Eva. "At least you might have told me! I can make every allowance. But, at least, you might have told!"

"Told what? Oh, you know, Rutger? I intended to tell you. It's a pity I'm too late."

"Yes, it certainly is a pity you're too late," he said, almost spitefully. She looked up, from her couch, amazed at this new tone.

"I can understand you were not anxious I should know," he continued, with impetus. "You were specially rash under the circumstances, and I had specially begged you to go back!"

"All that is true," she said. She drew her fingers along a dwarf plum-tree, sent from Sans-Souci: its masses of fading petals fell under her touch.

"It's worse than true," he said. "It needn't have happened. The child——"

"Dont't say that!" she cried out at him. Her eyes blazed. "Rutger, I have suffered enough!"

"I know you have been ill. I have pitied you——"

"I don't mean that—did you think I meant that?"

He hesitated, glanced at her, glanced away.

"No," he said.

"I have suffered enough, I think. It feels odd to suffer so much. Especially when one has never suffered before."

"Well, don't let's say any more about it. I'm glad you feel sorry."

"I don't think I feel sorry—not in that sense—not guilty. I don't want to deceive you." He wheeled round. "Not deceive me? And your silence all the time, after you came home?"

"Well, then, not deceive you now. I don't feel guilty. What must be must be. And the children had come miles in the snow."

"If you don't feel guilty," he said stiffly, "then, certainly, do not let us speak of it. Every word would be hopeless: let us try to forget. Yet, how can we do that? To me what you have done looks very like murder."

"You have spoken," she said. The ground was littered with pink blossoms: her hand sank to them.

He made one more desperate attempt. The tears were in his voice. "But surely you can see——" he stuck.

"I have told you all I can see. Quite. Dear Rutger, I am very, very sorry. Very, very wretched. But I don't believe—oh, I won't believe!—that it had been quite different, if I hadn't gone on." She held out her arms to him. "Kiss me!" she said.

"Well, it would have been," he answered, keeping back.

Then, swiftly, he repented and bent over her, kissing her young forehead and her cheeks. "But you deceived me," he said, unwilling, yet resolved to say it. "That is worst. You deceived me. For God's sake, don't do that again!"

The agony of the loss burned deep down into her heart: the agony of the deceit lay outside her.

"One thing at least I want you to promise me," he said. "To give up the beastly library—eh?"

"Oh, no," she answered quickly. "Oh no." She added softly: "It has cost me too much."

"It has cost other people more! The vet's wife has run away from him!"

She laughed. To his horror she laughed. A frightened, nervous laugh, but a laugh.

"Through reading one of your stupid plays," he said furiously. "Your wicked plays, the Bigis would say!"

"The Bigis! Mevrouw Dickert told me the woman

had revelled in the 'Doll's House'—you remember Ibsen's 'Doll's House!' Don't you? I thought every-one had seen it. We all went—how we laughed! That fool, Norah! You don't mean that I can help that? It was your parson's wife bought the plays. And there's hardly a play in which some woman doesn't run away from her husband. It's the one subject of interest, on the stage and off."

"Eva, you can't mean that!"

"But I do mean it! So would you if you'd been to more theatres. And read more novels. And, moreover, the vet is a brute."

"Most people would call him a very good fellow."

"Well, he isn't. He's the sort of man a nice woman would loathe."

"Why, pray?"

"Don't let's analyse. It's not a pleasant subject for dissection. He's got fat hands and a loud laugh, and I should have run away from him."

"You are pleased to be jocular," he said in a white rage, for he caught an accent of her father's voice. "But if literature is all that you declare—and I don't pretend to any opinion on the subject—all the more reason to consider it superfluous in the existence of the middle and lower classes of Skilda. Father Bredo is quite right."

"I can't give it up," she said. She rose, and her sleeve swept the last buds from the bare branches. "It's my one interest, Rutger—you mayn't take it away from me! Besides, people would laugh to hear about the measles—yes, they would laugh!"

"Laugh!"

"Yes, laugh! It's just one of those sublime things in life that become tragi-comic——"

"Comic! Only at Sans-Souci!"

"Tragi-comic": she went on, trying not to hear him, as he hoped not to hear her. "To me, at any rate, and to many people! And the Norah business is pitiful—pitiful! But don't you see?—if we break down

with it all now, it's—it's like confessing it's my fault."

"George, that's true!" He gulped down his pride. "Better to cry peccavi than go on sinning."

"You give such a theological twist to everything," she said angrily. "One would think you had been discussing it with the Bigis."

"You might have chosen a worse guide."

"Rutger, please don't let us bicker! Please not! You must leave me this one amusement—and good work! I'll do anything you like with you—to help you—can I do anything?"

"I really don't see what. Oh yes, amuse Gallas. Don't let him run off because he's too dull."

"There, you see: there's nothing!"

"Are *you* too dull? I sometimes think——"

"No, no. Would you really like me to ask someone's advice. Mevrouw Dickert has made a horrible mess, of course. Whom can I ask? Not the Bigis?"

"Well, yes—why not Margot Bigi?"

"She will scratch out every number except 'Jessica's First Prayer.'"

"That must be a very beautiful book," said Rutger gravely. He resolved to read it. Doubtless a more theological Mr. Peggotty moved a little Jessica Emly to repent?

"It is," answered Eva on her way upstairs, escaping. "It meets many requirements. But not all." She betook herself to the room that was to have been the nursery, the grim room she had once been afraid to enter, with the black winking wainscot, the room with its foolish memory of mythical crime.

She sat thinking. The piano stood open, but she could not play. In this room she had collected photos, views, mementos of home. Here and there, in a silver frame, in an ivory one, her father's smiling face, her mother's serene one—portraits of the others, a few selected groups, in fancy dresses, on horseback, at

tennis—a constantly evoked reminiscence of paper-chases, private theatricals, matches, balls. And some of the furniture of her girl-sitting-room, a little incongruous among the Flemish oak.

"Margot Bigi as a literary adviser!" she said between her teeth. Her eye fell on a soiled picture of a party fishing in a punt. "Eureka!" she said—a favourite word of her easily finding father. She mentally appointed Victor Hugo, vice Mevrouw Dickert deposed. Of course he will want to air theories, she sighed, but I'll *make* him talk sense. She gazed round at all the laughing brightness of the past, now so silent. The gay figures among the roses, on the slopes. It was not common sense, perhaps; it certainly was not flatness. Not "arable land and a sense of duty" as her father had said. She rose, to look out of the window. Something had burst in her heart since that morning: out of the crack welled water and blood. "I may be a fool," she said bitterly, convinced of her own weakness, "but I am a woman-fool—not a child-fool at any rate." She turned the wedding-ring on her finger. "I'd intended to write to-day to 'the Children.' No, I mustn't write home to-day."

There was one thing she had long put off doing. And that she now undertook, with febrile fervour. In the big old Flemish cupboard she piled up all the pink-bound socks and sheets and piles of clothing, all the paraphernalia of human birth. And she thought much, as she worked, arranging a finale or, if only an intermezzo, then, at least, a change of measure. It seemed to her almost as if in her own nature a new birth was taking place, an awakening that henceforth would refuse to be stilled.

Doubtless he was right: she had shamefully deceived him, with disastrous result. And, being right, he might claim to reproach, to instruct her. She hammered the thought down into her clamorous heart.

She—she had no claim at all! She could not even do her duty. The duties she tried to warm as dove's

eggs at her bosom broke out into serpents that bit her in the face.

"A thousand pardons for intruding!" She turned from her cupboard, with a swift bang of its door. "Mynheer Gallas? You?"

"Mynheer Knoppe sent me to fetch you. I couldn't find any of the servants. He fancied you might care to see the new steam-plough start work."

"By all means. I am coming." She caught abruptly at some bits of baby-linen; she strove to hide her confusion. "Please wait for me downstairs!" She followed him, still angry with herself, with everything, vexed that this unknown man should have found her thus.

"That is an exquisite room of yours," he said. "I trust you forgive me?"

"Hardly," she answered, walking beside him, through the rustling thaw. "I have found other things easier to forgive. You see, this is my particular sanctum. I only admit intimate friends."

"Then I must have patience," he said. "Some day, perhaps, I shall feel forgiven. On the day when I am admitted."

"Let us talk about tobacco," she replied. "Where have they begun with the steam-plough? You like talking about tobacco: do you not?"

He uttered a low whistle. He looked down, seeking to avoid, as he stepped, the spat of the melted road upon his boots. She noted the unsuccessful effort. Rutger would never have attempted it.

"Yes, I like tobacco," he answered curtly. "It is my work."

She had seen a good deal of him this last week or two, but always in the company of others. She had received no impression of his personality, nor had she sought for one. They walked on. They passed a child with a hoop. "There's something quite new to be seen over yonder! Run and look!" said Udo. She had never heard anyone speak so cheerily to a smutty street-child before. She glanced at him again.

"Tobacco? It's my work now," said Gallas, suddenly. "Still, one needn't always talk shop."

"You used to live in Brussels. And you have been much on the Riviera. My husband is so afraid you will feel bored."

Gallas stood still. "Bored? That's his kind heart. But he doesn't know me. I never feel bored. I feel furious, broken-hearted, suicidal, but I never feel bored. Now, I ask you: is life, with its heat and cold, ever boring? He isn't complimentary. Brains and hearts don't get bored."

"He doesn't think of all that," she replied, dissembling under outer calm the sudden pang of a probed wound. "And I'm sure he wouldn't like you to commit suicide here."

Gallas frowned. "Now you are laughing at me. Well, I'll promise to do the deed in an adjoining parish. But you needn't be alarmed. The people who feel most suicidal are the people who never commit suicide. As I can prove."

They walked on. If you laugh at me again, I shall be openly rude to you, he thought, proud and passionate. How far had she been from laughter!

"Yonder's the plough!" he said. They turned into the dark field towards it, in the grim greyness and dirt.

The strange machine was an event in the small life of Skilda. A number of shivering spectators straggled near it. The child with the hoop nudged closer to Gallas. The thing was ugly, smelly, out of harmony with this rural solitude of unfruitfulness. Its very shape and smoke called for the noise and energy of man. Rutger had chosen this first strip, not a mile from his own home, to experiment on. The great barren stretch lay largely under Volda.

He had waited for Eva: he gave the signal. And at once the thing started roaring with an appropriate rustle and puff. The yokels manifested such excitement as uninebriate countrymen are capable of expressing: their

eyes twinkled. Rutger, seated sideways on the smudgy engine, waved his cap with a glad halloo!

"Isn't this splendid?" he shouted. "Look at the way she tears up the very bowels! Nearly three feet with every wrench! Hooray!"

"Hrr-rrr!" said the engine.

"Splendid!" cried Eva. "You think so?" murmured the soft voice at her side. "Now, I should have called it a bit cruel. But women love——" She met his gaze. "My very thought!" she said. "Only, of course, the thought is silly!" The hideous car rattled on, in fits and starts, with a break over every fresh turn of the churn. They stood looking at the tortured earth, the broken masses, dead and alive.

Rutger jumped off and ran towards them. "She works gloriously! In a day or two, Gallas, we shall try the big slope!" His face glowed: he stood talking of his plans. His soiled clothes were all over thickening dirt: one of his hands showed bloody smears: his nails had got blacked.

"I fancy Mevrouw Knoppe is feeling the wind," said the spruce Gallas, for Eva had shivered twice.

Rutger turned, impatiently. "Oh yes," he said. "Yes, of course. You might go round to those shrubs."

"I prefer to go home now," she said. "I have seen it. It's wonderful." She could not have kept the perfunctoriness out of her voice, had she tried a little harder. She was too sore.

"It *is* cold," she said. "And so wretched!"

"People who have been ill should be more careful," suggested Gallas.

"George! that's true," exclaimed Rutger. "Take her back at once! Hurry home!"

But they neither hurried nor lingered. They walked back quietly, conversing as they went.

"Brussels? I like it too well," confessed Udo. "It isn't wholesome for young people to grow up in half a dozen different places. They're supposed to pick up the best of everything, but they don't. They remember

all the pleasant sides,—these only, and then they're discontented elsewhere."

"I suppose that is true," mused Eva. "But it might apply to one perfect home just as well."

"For the few who are lucky enough to be born amidst perfection. And to stay there. I just have to pick up what pleasure I can, as I go along."

"You have Celia's resourceful temperament," said Eva, trying to shield her face from the prick of the cold drizzle.

"No such luck! I take a consuming interest in the passing moment. For better or worse. My sister fashions her fate, or she fancies she does. I bray mine." He spoke as if the queer word came pat, as if he liked her to hear it. He ground the wet gravel under his feet, as he strode on. "And usually the pleasures aren't worth while."

"Then you should choose others."

"So I do—always too late. Now here's the tobacco! The passion of the hour!"

"But you had that in India?"

"No, that was common-place planting. The daily drudgery. This is pioneer-work. A new departure. Romance!"

"I see. I wonder you went to the Indies at all."

"Don't wonder!" he answered, picking his way with extra attention. "I asked my father to pay my Riviera debts, and he said he wouldn't. He said I must go to India, and I declined. Afterwards my mother told me they would pay: they suppressed the carriage. So I started for Sumatra: it's as simple as can be."

"I am glad to see they have a carriage again," said Eva.

"It's a motor-car, thanks. But the principle holds good."

"You will grow older and wiser," said Eva in her friendliest manner.

I know I shall be rude to her, he told himself; she ought to have her ears boxed, were there a woman

handy to do it! Aloud he said: "I have no desire for either. I shouldn't have talked about myself, only, on one or two occasions, I have fancied you accused me of virtue, and that is an accusation no man should accept from a woman undeserved."

"Have you been dining with my father?" she laughed.

He turned purple. "Yes," he said. "Before I came here, and a most delightful dinner it was!"

"I thought I recognised the quotation. But I think I have heard him add something about a plea of naughtiness which no woman need allow, unproved."

He kicked, with those well-preserved boots, at a clump of mud. "I am ready to prove it at any time," he said in a rage. "On oath! Do you always laugh at people? Except when you make them cry?"

"When you saw my mother, at that bright little dinner, was she looking well?"

"Like your elder sister. She walked a bit stiffly. But I hear she has been dancing since."

"Yes, her massage has done her good. And Marthe?"

"Your sister? She had an exquisite dress! Your sister did not wear her dress as you do. She had it on."

"She doesn't have to get her clothes at Kykstad!" exclaimed Ėva, in sudden desperation.

He glanced over her. "Made at Kykstad? But designed at Skilda! I congratulate you. And—may I say it—a woman with so much 'style' could wear anything."

"Thanks for your sympathy: it makes you frank. And now I am going to have some tea." She stopped by her own gate. He waited. No, she did not intend to take him back to that room of hers. "Your landlady makes yours very nicely, you said?"

"Did I? Oh, deliciously. I wouldn't miss it for worlds."

She took pity on him. "Well, let's go and ask Aunt Imka for a cup."

"By all means. We shall find the Freule Bigi

there: she leaves to-morrow. I am eager to discuss the runaway cow-doctor's wife with both."

Eva had recoiled. "Margot," she said. "Oh, by all means. But I can tell you their opinion of the runaway unheard. Freule Bigi thinks she isn't a good woman, and Freule Lexma thinks she is a bad one."

"And you, what do you think?"

"I—well, whom did she run away with?"

"Nobody—that's the joke. She wants to live her life."

"Poor thing! I suppose she has a right to that. So, really, you alone are to blame. You spring the hundred best plays on—Skilda!"

"Oh, to blame! To blame! Yes, if you like, I am to blame. I should like everybody to live his life, as much and as fast as she can."

"Your morals are as reprehensible as your grammar. Freule Lexma is beckoning to us. I shall have better advice about the books in a week or two."

CHAPTER XXV

THE Easter holidays were early that year. Of course Victor Hugo obeyed Eva's whistle. But he brought Fritz and Marthe along with him. "You don't mind?" Rutger had said. Eva didn't mind.

Rutger couldn't see what was wrong. Or rather he couldn't see where to put it right. The machine creaked: its technicalities were beyond him. It stuck: and when it moved, it tore up the soil, unlike a passenger-car, more like the steam-plough.

He could forgive: he had done so. But surely she couldn't expect him to forget the little grave in the Skilda cemetery. He had married a young girl for her youth and her light-heartedness. He must allow for these, fully, and he did. But he hadn't bargained for persistent wrong-headedness, and, worse, prolonged deceit.

"You are happy, are you not, Rutger?" said Aunt Imka, for he sat brooding.

"Happy? I should think so. Who wouldn't be happy with so bright a wife as Eva?"

"True, but you worry too much about that tobacco. Times are changed. In my day a gentleman never worried about his business or about his wife."

"He hadn't any 'business'," said Rutger.

"He had not. I don't think I had heard the word before I came to Slaapstad."

"You've spoilt me for all other women!" exclaimed Rutger. "It's bad to live with a woman who sacrifices herself as you have done! *You*'ve never lived your life! You've lived your men's!"

"My dear boy, what do you mean?" The old lady's work rested in her lap. "Did you expect me

to be an actress or a dancer? Those live their own lives, I understand. Variety, interrupted by divorce. A respectable woman, as you say, lives her men's." She resumed her work. Frankly, Eva was not good enough for Rutger.

Eva was good enough. She had resolved to be bright, and she was bright. Bright with an effort, and a consciousness of success. She, certainly, had not forgotten the little grave in the cemetery. She brought early flowers there, once or twice, timidly, and carried them away again, embarrassed lest Rutger should revert to a subject they had better avoid. She sat, pathetically, by the mound till she looked at her watch and took the little heap of white lilac away again. Then she realised how silly she was—it felt like cooking something by time—so she stopped it. She planted a few wild-flowers—buttercups, dandelions, in the hope that Rutger would imagine they had sprung up of themselves. Most certainly she cared, even grieved, for the sorrow, but she deeply resented the unrepeated, permanent imputation of guilt. At the same time it braced her. She was awakened to the wind and the sun: to anger, to sorrow, to emotion, to love. She would not have gone back, if she could, to the old existence of case-hardened happiness. She felt the blood tingle, as a child with numbed hands, in the heat. Her woman's heart was alive.

"I am so glad you have asked Marthe," wrote her mother. "She needs a change. She sulks, and I, who don't know the feeling, am unable to advise. She says life isn't worth living, yet I am sure her digestion's all right. The only other explanation would be love; but this she utterly repudiates. Perhaps you can find out. However, when a girl says she isn't in love, she either is, or isn't, or she doesn't know. In no case can a third person be much use. I am better."

Eva found her sister full of irritable gaiety. And

that, to the finer sympathies, is like a bar of foaming surf. Nor had there ever been easy intercourse between the two: their natures were such as agree but do not mingle. Marthe had always been self-conscious and self-willed: Eva, though she might not worry over her sister's welfare, certainly did not bother about her own. The younger now missed the elder's self-sacrifice.

"I wish you were back at Sans-Souci," she blurted out.

"So do I, sometimes," said Eva, "till I realise how good it is to be here."

"Yes, it must be great fun being married," nodded Marthe. "To have your foot on the red neck of a man!"

A burst of boy laughter exploded behind her back. She dashed round, boiling over. "Why don't you get back to your dirt and your smells?" she cried. "Go and turn your beastly pump!"

"Pity her: she means plough," said Fritz gently. Fritz, who believed himself (still) to be of the "nil admirari" type, had unlimitedly lost his young heart to his brother-in-law. He slaved around, everywhere, after him: his ideal was to become a burgomaster. Also, partly, because you can do that without taking a degree. Fritz spoke of his life as if it were a labour of Sisyphus, but, in reality, he had sent the stone up by parcels delivery, and (correctly) expected to find all freightage paid by his father, at the top. Had he not occasionally plagued his two juniors he would never have been in anyone's way. He had a trick of flinging his arm round his mother's neck which pleased her vastly and cost him nothing. And he was good, contented, and happy, because he had the sense, whenever he drove his hand into his pocket, to find a silver florin at the bottom.

"No man can be unhappy," quoth Victor Hugo, "whose stomach is hungry, and whose purse is full." He gazed at the others, scattered about, in nice

clothes, after dinner. "No human animal, I ought to have said."

"Yes," responded Eva. "You come away with me, poor boy, and let the others play bridge! You can't play bridge, and Mynheer Knoppe has won a championship. Come and sit with me among the lilacs and tell me how you scorn a man who could win a championship—at bridge!" .

She sank down on a settee, in a pretty corner she had made for herself in the ugly drawing-room under a tall vase of Charles X. lilacs, sent from Sans-Souci. Piet Perk chose a circumspect seat opposite, and drew in his legs.

"It is very kind of you to have me like this, Mevrouw," he said. "It is a very great honour. Few people would do it. My mother can't sleep, thinking of it, at night."

"Now, don't be rude," said Eva. "For of course you mean that we treat you as a sort of upper nurse. We don't a bit. We haven't the necessary imagination."

Victor Hugo possessed less sense of humour than any creature that ever lived except the camel. His long face grew longer, as he chewed his bitter cud.

"Health and wealth," he said. "To have these is to have everything. It is to be a happy human cow."

Eva thought best not to focus his simile. Her glance slid down her slim figure in its tight-fitting pale satin. From the distance came Marthe's voice in dispute.

"You love flowers?" he said.

"You know I do—who doesn't?"

"That is why you like to see them round you—dying, cut away from their feet, forced to bloom and die in an hour!" He jerked his head at the lilacs, which hung, graceful, in their fading health.

"It is quite right and natural that you should," he continued. "The good-fortune of a woman of fashion

is built up on the destruction of dozens of beautiful things, including a certain—an uncertain number of less favoured female souls—you won't deny that?"

"I will deny that I am a woman of fashion."

"A woman of the upper class. I can't distinguish the kinds."

"Yes, Victor Hugo, you are right. Oh, quite right. You must state fresher truths if you want to enjoy the pleasure of contradiction. We are a pyramid, father says. Those at the top are a bit dizzy, and those at the bottom a bit crushed."

"The pyramid'll topple over," said Victor Hugo, darkly.

"Can they? Then those from the bottom'll feel frantically dizzy, and those off the top'll be"—she shrugged her white shoulders—"oh, certainly very badly crushed."

"You talk as if you enjoyed the prospect," he said.

"My dear Victor Hugo, when your Socialist Revolution is over—if I am not guillotined, which I certainly think the most distinguished part to play in it,—I shall ask you to make me your goddess of—what was it?—Reason, and I shall go round advising the women to dress better than ever."

"But they couldn't. There would be no more Slaves of the Stitch."

"And you believe in evolution? Everyone of us would develop her own feathers, all the finer on that account! Then the loveliest of us would ask your President of Utopy for the golden apple, and you'd all be turned out of your Paradise again." She gazed across at him, smiling, under the lilacs, in the pale long gown like a glove.

"Eve!" he snapped.

She glanced at the jewelled watch on her wrist, the bracelet Rutger had given her.

"Your ten minutes are long over," she said. She drew a gardenia from a little vase at her side and coolly

handed it him for his buttonhole. "You must come down from your Socialist plank and talk sense about my books again. Good common sense. You have helped me a lot."

From the outer room rang Marthe's cry: "Mynheer Gallas cheats!"

And Gallas's cool yet envenomed retort: "Then take me as your partner." .

"Oh, she shouldn't say a thing like that!" exclaimed Eva. "She really doesn't know what she says or does sometimes!"

"Stupid thing, she occasionally speaks the truth!" He drove in the flower awkwardly.

"She certainly didn't this time," answered Eva with warmth.

"He is a bad man, but a gentleman. Stick up for him."

Eva hesitated. "Why do you call him a bad man? I think he is very nice."

"Nice is the word," said Victor Hugo. "Analyse it."

"I am not a school-girl. Yes, yes, Victor Hugo, I am quite willing to learn from you. Here is my catalogue: we had got to letter—why don't you like Mynheer Gallas?"

"Ask your sister why she likes him. That is a matter of much greater interest, Mevrouw."

"My—whatever do you mean? How can you insinuate——Be quiet—here they are!"

Marthe rushed in with a whirl.

"Eva, you go and play! Gallas says you play better than I!"

"Mynheer Gallas isn't a great judge," replied Eva. "He plays far too emotionally himself."

"One would think it was Beethoven not bridge," said Victor Hugo, scowling at Sherlock.

"A good idea!" exclaimed Eva. She rose, struggling to regain her composure, and, with the Bechstein open before her, struck the first few chords of a sonata.

Rutger entered at the moment, with the other men: she passed into the "Walzertraum."

Gallas bent over the piano. "Do you always play rubbish—for others?" he asked, very low.

She nodded, playing faster.

CHAPTER XXVI

NEXT morning Victor Hugo's brief visit came to an end. It was true that he had done good service for the library. No so much in excluding as in classifying. An omnivorous student, but also a capable pedagogue, he had assigned to each volume before him its place in the hearts and heads of the reading public. Of course he premised that they possessed neither, before he sat down to cater for both. An unnoticeable mark was made inside the covers, and the books were then sorted on their shelves. Only the quite rotten were extracted and flung in disgrace on the floor. "You can't diet the whole place for a few cranks," said Victor Hugo, and Eva agreed with him.

They stood contemplating the result of their labour with considerable satisfaction.

"You've been an immense help!" repeated Eva. "Throw away that gardenia. It's dead."

Victor Hugo squinted down at the yellowing flower. 'No, I'll keep it," he said. "I love horticulture—it's so unlike gardening. This sort of thing, out of a steaming glass cupboard, sickly-white, sickly-shaped, sickly-scented. It's so like our civilisation—yours!"

"And like literature," she said, gazing at the book-shelves. "You mustn't repeat so, dear man. 'Pelléas and Mélisande' is a great deal more of an orchid than —I!"

Victor Hugo reddened. "I wasn't personal," he said.

"I know. You were only unhappy. You must find a nice wife, a good post, and a working creed. Now, what are we to do with this discarded rubbish? Ah, here are the Dominé and his wife come to wish you good-bye."

The diminutive Dickerts stood peeping round the door-post. Mynheer Dickert had taken a great liking to the well-informed school-master, which Mevrouw Dickert, who only liked men that paid her court or to whom she must pay court, saw no reason to share.

"Dominé, what shall we do with this rubbish?" demanded Eva.

"Rubbish is only matter out of place," sagely responded the Dominé.

"Then where shall we locate ours?" persisted Perk.

"Give the poor things to me!" said Mevrouw Dickert, bridling, under her feathers. "I'm sure I chose some of them myself. Most. I was admirably advised by friends who live in a university town and keep two servants. Say no more about it, please!" She pushed the books together with her pretty, showy foot.

Victor Hugo caught Eva's imploring glance. "Dominé, you remember your Apostle!" he exclaimed. "New milk for babes, you know; strong meat for men! Compared with the notary's wife, or Freule Imka, Mevrouw Dickert's a *man!* Her intellect can't feed on pap! She needs meat, as Mynheer Melissant said to me. This is meat—on the floor here—some of it quite strong!"

The Dominé had been poking into empty corners, his way of hiding embarrassment. He now wheeled round in one of them. "Freule Imka is a beautiful old lady," he said cheerfully, "but her range is limited, as even Mevrouw Knoppe will admit. I can sympathise with her not caring for the present, but she even takes no interest in the past!"

"Before 1517," corrected Eva.

"An important year for you, Dominé," nodded Perk.

"I don't know," replied the pastor. "I should have been exactly where I was. There would only have been no Mevrouw Dickert." His wife came round the corner, to remove more rubbish-heap. The Dominé poked.

"Had I been alone," he resumed, amid the silence,

"a studious monk in a monastery-cell, I should probably have deciphered the Dar-es-Salak inscription. Now, when Mevrouw Dickert is reading modern literature, I have to blow all the children's noses, in turns!" He sighed heavily and repeated: "In turns." It was an additional grievance, in the constant interruption of his study, that they could not all be blown at the same time. Mevrouw Dickert again sulked round the corner, searching for more rubbish-heap. Eva took leave.

"That remark of my father's—about whom did he make it?" said Eva on the road.

"About Mevrouw Dickert," replied Victor Hugo. "He sent her some books through me. A dreadful woman! She amused him. You all do. Well, it's about my time. I haven't asked after your own story. Better not, perhaps? I thought so. I mustn't keep your motor waiting, Mevrouw! If I began thanking you, I should miss my train."

Eva watched him hurrying off to the garage—she ascribed this premature flurry to "train-fever." "He is dreadfully nervous," she said to herself, as she dawdled towards the house. Whereby she meant "unbalanced," for nervousness as a pathological condition was ignored at Sans-Souci and unknown at Skilda. Marthe was presumably "high-strung," if you thought it out, and Gallas perhaps might also prove so. Eva's own husband despised nerves, and if asked to define the disease would certainly have replied with some word unrepeatable before ladies. She had only once seen him strike anybody; that was when he boxed the ears of the lubberly garden-lad, in a sudden flare of rage, because the red-faced lout said it made him "nervous" to touch his cap to Eva. The young citizen, backed by his father, brought an action—successfully, of course—for assault.

Fritz Melissant stood in the doorway. "We are going across to the farthest tobacco field," he cried, enthusiastically. "All the way with Rutger! It's too

far for you to walk, Eva. You must take your drive with your Aunt Imka."

"As usual," said Eva. She knocked at her sister's door. "May I come in? Are you going to walk all that distance, Marthe?"

"Yes; Gallas is coming too."

"Don't you think it would be more usual to call him Mynheer Gallas?" She drew nearer. Marthe, who had bent over her toilet table, thrust something out of sight.

"Don't spy and don't scold," replied Marthe. "I can't see that it matters what I call him, as long as I don't call him mine."

"Marthe, you are getting vulgar," said Eva. The other girl started up, redhot at once. "Vulgar!" she cried. You—I——!"

"Don't lose your temper, I can't help it," continued Eva, also reddening. "I mean well. I wanted to tell you, because you know that is the one thing will grieve our parents most. They don't expect us to be saints, but they do expect us to behave. You can abuse me if you like, but for Heaven's sake ne t'encanaille pas. That'll hurt them."

"Have you quite done?"

"Quite. Forget. And enjoy your walk."

"*You* can go and give your old aunt lessons in refinement." Marthe drew herself up affectedly. "Mynheer Gallas is absolutely nothing to me. The portrait I hid away was not his."

"Then I trust it was one of your schoolgirl friends," said Eva, hastily departing. She shrank from analysis of her strong sense of relief.

The Freule woke up and began to talk tobacco. "I can't understand," she said. "If tobacco can grow in Holland, then why didn't the ancient Dutch smoke?"

Eva tried to explain something about importation.

"Of course I know things have to be imported," said the Freule, a little testily for her, "but all I mean is

one would think it could have been imported at once, like horses and beer."

Eva suppressed a yawn.

"The three things a man wants, in fact, to start with," continued the Freule, smoothly.

"And a wife," said Eva, gazing out into the pale green brightening of the fields.

"My dear, that sounds—excuse me—slightly foolish. For there had to be a wife somewhere before he could start at all."

Over this retort the spicy old lady quite woke up, and she tattled on, till they came in sight of the far tobacco field, about all the men she remembered who had smoked too much tobacco and drunk too much beer and done too much of many things they ought never to have begun. Many of these anecdotes Eva had heard, but not Gallas, who drove back with them, after the inspection, being anxious to get home, so he said, before dark.

The worst about the Freule's excellent pack of stories was that they never shied at a ditch or a hedge. Breathless with laughing, perhaps, but also with anxiety, you followed their headlong career. The refined old lady's ideas of propriety were those of the seventeenth century Dutch painters. Eva suffered mental agonies —more than she would have thought possible—boxed up, for the first time, during this long drive, in the close carriage with Gallas and the Freule. One could not inform the dignified, courteous narrator that really that adventure of her old uncle with the cook was racy beyond modern belief.

"Don't you think he was right?" asked the Freule of Gallas.

"Undoubtedly. Sensible, in any case," replied the male, greatly diverted, but also, be it said to his credit, extremely uncomfortable. "We are passing through Volda; could we not stop just one moment and see the famous church?"

"I thought you were in a hurry," said Eva quickly; she felt too incongruous.

"I was, but the Freule's horses go so fast."

The Freule beamed. She was not a bad judge of horseflesh, only bent on having too much of it. Her fat horses jogged, knowing that she wished them to be fat.

"True," said Eva. "I suppose five miles an hour only seems slow in comparison with a motor-car." Gallas lost countenance.

"You do right to laugh at her," smiled the Freule, "with her absurd motor-car."

"Be as long as you like," said the Freule at the church door. "Don't mind me, dear. But I never was in a Catholic chapel in my life, and I cannot do anything new at near ninety, except die."

As they went into the building they heard her say: "Walk the horses; don't let them catch cold, Jan!"

The dim church was empty; only a blue whiff of incense shaped moving shades behind the stolid pillars. The silence deepened as they lingered in it. From the black foliage of the woodwork the solemn figures gazed.

"There is no one here," said Eva, "the little sacristy door is locked." She seated herself. "I am glad! I dislike the deaf and dumb man. He is almost as creepy as the dog."

"What dog?"

"My husband's. He steals round in the same way. Don't let's speak of him here." Her voice was so low he bent to hear her.

"It's a wonderful place," she said, still under her breath, "isn't it? Quite different from anywhere or anything. The deaf and dumb man carved all that isn't old. You can't distinguish. He is mediæval himself: the Father loves him for that. I'm glad he isn't here."

"It is wonderful," said Udo, in the same low voice. "I have waited till you could show it me. You have not said too much."

Great bars of darkness sank deep into the arched corners, making masses of gloom. The pale windows

high up, blocked, a dead white, within their dulled colour. Down below, in the grey silence, the shadowy saints stood still.

Udo Gallas sank on the stone chancel steps. "I'm not praying," he said quickly. "I'm only getting the effect." She didn't ask what effect. His voice at least had rung with sweet emotion, whatever the emotion might be.

"I could stay for ever," he said, "but the horses will take cold." So they withdrew, very softly, down the aisle: by the shrine of St. Nicholas stood Father Bredo.

"I saw the carriage," he said. "Would you like to show your friend the Madonna?"

His half-hidden apparition, in the chapel shadow, had startled her. "Oh no," she said, agitated. "Not now, thanks! It is too late."

"What Madonna?" questioned Gallas, with ill-disguised curiosity.

"The most beautiful thing we have," said the old collector, nettled.

"Not now! Another time: we will come back. My aunt is waiting. You know that I come back: I can't help it. I will bring Mynheer Gallas. He is living at Skilda."

"By all means," said the Father gravely. "My Madonna will not run away. The Freule's horses might! From this home of iniquity."

"We must go—we have kept her too long. We have indeed."

"It *is* late. I must follow you," said the Father. "I have business with the parish clerk." She knew that the old man bicycled about his sparsely-peopled cure. She spoke of it to Aunt Imka in the carriage.

"And very good exercise for the purple creature," said Aunt Imka. "If I were a little dog I should chase his fat calves."

"Aunt Imka!" exclaimed Eva, in disgust.

"I certainly should," nodded the Freule. "My

dear, you must leave me my religious convictions. I wasn't taught, as you were, to believe in nothing. And my French grandmother could *tell me*, Mynheer Gallas, how her grandfather's feet were scorched, as a boy, because he refused to say where the Bible was hid!"

"How splendid!" exclaimed Gallas. "Actually told you!" His eyes shone.

"Told me, as her grandmother had told her. When you have that sort of thing in your family—they keep the Bible—and his crutch—you are not so easy-going, Eva! Anyhow" — the Freule flung back in her carriage—"I refuse to believe that John the Baptist had three heads, for the Bible would have mentioned so unusual a fact."

"Must you believe that?" asked Gallas, relieved to have got away from secular stories.

"Yes, for all three are genuine: they burnt a man in Mexico for denying that last year. And how," continued the Freule, warming, "could the head have got to Mexico, when Salome jumped with it into the Lake of Lucerne?"

"You musn't limit the marvellous," replied Gallas. "There is Mevrouw Dickert, plodding through the mud."

"Yes. I think I'll plod the last bit with her," gasped Eva. "I want to ask her— " she didn't know what. She only wanted to get away from this horrible talk.

"The two are great friends," said Aunt Imka.

And the Dominé's wife was never at a loss for conversation. She had the doings of all of her acquaintances to complain of, which was unreasonable, when one considers how greatly she commiserated their lack of sense. If you have clearly perceived, by means of your own fine sight, that your neighbour has no eyes, it is surely unjust to reproach him lengthily for being blind. Mevrouw Dickert had news of the vet's poor wife. Breathless, her skirts half way to her knees, she discoursed between the puddles. The runaway, it appears, "led her life" behind the counter of a sweet-shop. Eva listened to five minutes of this babble, then she

paused where Father Bredo stood pitifully watching the emptying Protestant school.

"What lake did Salome drown herself in, Father?"

"I haven't an idea," said the Father. "What a delightful racket those dear children make!"

Mevrouw Dickert spluttered on in a fury. "She quitted me to talk to that Papist!" protested Mevrouw Dickert. "We shall see what we shall see."

"What shall we see?" questioned Solomon, cleaning the youngest child but one. By request, as always. He paused, quite indifferent, to catch her reply.

"The husband in the States Provincial and the wife in a confessional," prophesied Mevrouw Dickert. And neither with *my* consent!"

"The confessional was in use in ancient Egypt: we ought to have retained it," said the Dominé.

"I wish you had!" cried Mevrouw Dickert, her little eyes quite ravenous. I wish you had—O-oh!"

CHAPTER XXVII

"You will take me again to see the church," pleaded Gallas.

"No," said Eva. "I have taken you."

"But we didn't see half," he begged.

"You must see the rest by yourself." His voice made her turn hot and cold. He should speak of ordinary matters in an ordinary way!

He had met her at a turn of the village street, as she came back from the cemetery, a few buttercups in her hand.

"It's no use going by myself," he said. "I shouldn't get the emotion."

"Try to persuade Aunt Imka! I prefer my own emotions, which I couldn't get with you."

He persisted. "I am full of curiosity to see the marvellous Madonna."

"Just so—curiosity! That you may go back to the others and laugh at a religion, which you don't understand!"

"You are bitter," he said, biting his lip.

"I speak from the depths of a bitter experience. I'm not going to take any more scoffers to Volda!"

"I am not a scoffer," he said.

"Do you mean to tell me you want to go there to pray?"

"I do not," he answered. "Don't you remember, I told you so?"

"I remember: that is why I would rather not take you again."

"Well, at least you are honest," he said; his underlip shook against his teeth.

"I am not honest," she cried, dropping the buttercups, "for I don't go to pray myself."

He stooped to gather up the wild flowers. They were passing the Protestant Church of Skilda, ugly even in this Calvinist region, white-washed inside and out.

"But you would like to," he said softly, reading her inmost soul, to her dismay, like an open folio. "Well, so should I. Only, I can't, and you can."

She said nothing, walking on.

"You and I haven't learnt much about religion," he continued. "I wonder, do the people who think life a bore think death a joke?"

"You recall too much every light word one says. It is a mistake."

"Oh, not that! But I try to think your thoughts. Here in this dead marsh there are one or two rippling brooklets. Higher up, as they ought to be. You don't mind my saying that? I like to listen to the water, alive!"

She laughed it off. "Which are the others? Mevrouw Dickert?"

"The Madonna of Volda is the other. Mysterious and fascinating—two."

"You are enthusiastic, Mynheer Gallas!" she said brusquely. "Of course you can bicycle to Volda, till your enthusiasm tires of the Madonna—how long do you expect that to take? I will give you a note for the priest: he is rather exclusive about showing the inner face."

"It is an inner face! I never dreamed of that. Yet I might have guessed."

"I am sorry I told you. I warn you, my father, who is such a judge, saw nothing in it."

"Some critics feel more for outer forms than for inner faces," he said. "Who is the poet who talks about the soul-face that you only show to one woman?"

"Oh—oh—oh! Only one?"

He tried to laugh also. "Only one at a time."

She stopped dead. "I am going home. I suppose you turn off here, to your rooms?"

He bethought himself. He looked at her hard-set eyes. "Yes," he answered.

All the way up the quiet lane she mused without interruption, on those words of his about the marsh and the brook. They were foolish words, but they had revealed a soul-face in the muddy water for which she was least of all prepared. She dreaded, with all the fierce dread of solitude, lest that face should reflect itself in the brook! For it was vain to deny the living babble of the current! Did she not hold her hand to check its flow as a child does? Never again would the swan-pond of Sans-Souci suffice her: she had risen from her moated seclusion a woman, with a woman's sorrow and desire.

At the door of the house she saw her mother in an admirable motor coat, contemplative of wide wet. "What roads!" said Mevrouw Melissant. "Have they been like this ever since I left?"

"Yes!" said Eva. "You here!"—the tears sprang into her voice.

"So you see. We motored over to fetch the children. Shoving is quite my latest craze: you see, I can no longer ride. We've brought Cissie!"

"I *am* glad," said Eva. "Oh, I *am* glad! Now I can hear all about your health."

"No, my child." Mevrouw Melissant drew her arm through her daughter's. "That subject is tabooed. I limp—*voilà!* You can't think what fun driving the machine is. Do you like my coat—it is by Ferreire."

Melissant dawdled out of the drawing-room, a cigarette between his lips, and the dog Sherlock at his heels. "Uncomfortable brute!" said Melissant. "He won't let me smoke anywhere but in your cosy corner!"

"Yes, he guards Rutger's sanctum," said Eva. "His growl's my chief companion when Rutger's away. Oh!" She caught herself up. "It's all right now you've come. How sweet of you! How long are you going to remain?"

"Two days. Celia has a most amusing party on Friday. Everybody has to come as a caricature of some other guest."

"Won't that be rather ill-natured?" said Eva.

"That's the beauty of it: it's a lesson in good-nature. The spiteful ones won't be allowed to dance."

"You dance, mother dear?" said Eva, circumventing Sherlock.

"More or less. I will show you the list of the guests, Eva, and you can help me choose. There are the children—in high spirits! I must make Rutger remark my new coat."

A few minutes later she was expostulating with her son-in-law. "I tell you, you *must* notice clothing. You must *make* yourself see it: a man owes that to his wife: does he not, Mynheer Gallas?"

"Mevrouw Knoppe's little tight-fitting winter-jacket suits her to perfection," said Gallas.

"What? What jacket? Oh, you mean the little fur jacket." Rutger turned away. He was willing enough to admire his wife's clothes, but not as a sort of chorus to Gallas. He preferred to aid Fritz in that youth's enthusiastic endeavours to stir Melissant's soul with the steam-plough. "But I really am interested," said Melissant, "Thirteen feet? Oh, I beg your pardon. Three!"

"Well, Fritz has enjoyed himself at any rate," said Mevrouw Melissant to Eva in her own bedroom. "He has his father's gift of adaptability. Marthe still looks cross. Can there be anything absurder than continuing cross? You haven't discovered what about? Hand me that iron, please! I suppose she's hankering after someone: she says not. If she insists on choosing an Adam with no clothes to his back, or a shabby uniform—of course, I care—I'm not a monster—but I can't be bothered. And I don't think money or position really matter much, as long as you marry in your own set. People rub on. And, if you love a man, you'd better marry him. I hope you like your Adam?"

"Indeed I do," said Eva.

"Of course. You remember the fuss there was, a couple of years ago, about Nina Loring? Well, she's quite got over her first mistake, and she's all right again: she's married her hussar. That's the best solution: all the same, it's a bad one. Your father is right. It's idiotic of any woman to lose the heart she's given away."

"She hasn't always given it," said Eva.

"Yes, she has. Unless she was sold, like in the harems. At any rate, scandal is always ridiculous."

"Don't speak of Nina Loring to Rutger. She's some connection of his—he thinks she ought to be hanged or pilloried or something."

"He is right. She ought to have been, but now she's married again and gone away and we can forgive her. Happy men! They've got no pillory. Like your wicked flirt of a father, who's turned the head of a poor little woman here—she writes him the drollest letters—says her husband is a mummy! and he a—you must ask him to show you one! I'm afraid Marthe has some of her father's qualities that only look nice in a man. Fortunately Udo Gallas isn't a bit of a lady-killer. Celia tells me he has never gone in for that."

"No," said Eva, discovering, as she spoke. "I should think he would take love too seriously."

"How tiresome!" remarked Mevrouw Melissant, her attention concentrated on her toilet. "Especially for him. Well, some children'd be a worry, if you let them. We never had any trouble with you or Fritz. And now Mom is tiresome also. His father's scolding him at this moment; he can't scold a bit!"

Melissant was doing his best with his youngest child, in the drawing-room. "I had this," he said, "just before we came away. I didn't want to spoil your run, but what the dickens does it mean?" He held up a roll of paper and let the heavy part fall, with a long rush, to the floor.

"It's the man's idea of humour," replied Mom, settling

himself in his sister's cosy corner. "I don't think it's funny—do you?"

"I am no judge. Perhaps you will condescend to explain?"

"My dear father," urged the youth, negligently contemplating the long screed, "you can see it is his bill. He said you would be surprised at its length, so I advised him to stick the sheets together, and he's done so."

"A dozen suits," said Melissant, "more than a dozen hats, caps, ties, scarves, studs, collars innumerable! Under ——"

Mom had held up his hand. "Sounds as if you were taking stock!" he said. "Etcetera, father."

For one moment Melissant gazed at his offspring. "You don't mind my sharing that corner with you?" he said. "It's the only comfortable seat in the room."

"Oh, I beg your pardon, father!" Mom moved courteously aside.

"Thanks. My dear boy, of course you must have clothes. I have noticed your—variety. I should not think of objecting. But allow me to point out that there is a limit—ostentation—which is—forgive the commonplace—vulgar."

Mom coloured at once, under his polished black hair.

"It's the only word: excuse me!" said Melissant. "No man on earth should buy four bowler hats at a time."

"I don't see why you should preach at me," muttered the lad. "I didn't ask to be born. Now I'm here, I must have clothes."

"Young man, there are so many children being sent off daily from up yonder, really, I didn't order this particular one! Don't let's waste time, I must go and dress."

"There, you see!"

"Quite so—I've got a light!—I am happy to think

that my dress clothes look neither old nor new. Now, you, at sixteen may have clothes that look new, even brand-new, but not always! What I deplore is that my son should enjoy going about, permanently, in a shiny bowler!" Melissant watched the curl of his cigarette smoke. "Of course," he said, "you may do as you like,"—and his eyes dropped to the great scroll on the floor. "You've really had the things, haven't you? Well and good. If I pay more for you now than for Fritz, you'll have so much less when I die. You'll find it all down in black and white."

"Fritz? Fritz looks like a navvy!" exclaimed Mom indignantly. "His hands smell of oil!"

"So does your head. Mind you, I am merely suggesting. I love all my children, but God forbid I should prevent any of them playing the fool!" He got up from his close squeeze by the boy's side and strolled away.

"You won't bother Eva?" said Mom in a low voice.

"How do you mean?"

"Eva's always been awfully jolly. I don't want her to be cross with me the two days we're here."

"Set your mind at rest. But she certainly will not admire your diamond pin."

"It's real diamonds!"

Melissant gazed at him. "Are you, you young ass, a son of mine?" he said. "I only meant, if you must waste money, buy a pearl."

Then the father ran upstairs, carolling 'The Merry Widow.' "I like 'The Merry Widow,'" he said to his consort. "The thought that there are merry widows is the only one that reconciles me with death."

"Nonsense," replied Mevrouw Melissant. "Very few husbands could prevent their merry widow from being a merry wife!"

"Hear your father singing overhead!" said Rutger. "He'll be late."

"No—he wouldn't keep us waiting! We shall have to do something to amuse them to-morrow."

"Yes," said Rutger. "I'll take him to see my steam plough. It isn't much, but it's all I can think of."

"We could have in some people to dinner—a scratch lot."

"Would *that* amuse them? Surely they'd rather be alone with you?" He stopped, open-mouthed.

"I think not. They'll have me all to-night. They'd like to laugh over some of the local swells."

"H'm!" said Rutger, not over-delighted. "The Dickerts?"

"Oh, no. A couple of Bigis, for instance. And one or two more of that kind, if you can get them."

"I should have to send for the man from Kykstad, then, if he's disengaged. Or do you think cook would do?"

"Hardly. We shall be a large party. And father is sure to notice *everything*, and say he hasn't. Mother doesn't care, so long as the dishes are all pink and yellow, and frilled."

"I'll go into Kykstad myself to-morrow morning then and see what and whom I can get."

"Won't you let me do that?" she said.

"Oh no, you must see as much of them as possible. It'll take me the better part of the day."

"That is true," said Eva. She could order a dinner as well as he could—better: but it cost a great deal more. And she couldn't hunt up a couple of men as he must, compelling them: half a dozen girls would drive half a dozen miles, gladly, any day.

CHAPTER XXVIII

"YES, I managed Nina Loring's whole business for her," said Cissie proudly, "though I shan't be duly qualified till next term!"

"Hush!" Eva looked round nervously. "Let's go up to my room," she said, laughing. "Shut out the dog. Oh, I know it's half mad of me! I've a crazy sort of idea, that he hears what I say."

"Eva!" Cissie flung herself on a rug by the wood fire. "Send me a postcard, if you ever go quite out of your mind."

"I know. You come and live here all winter with the dog. His life's mission is the punishment of crime. He abhors Nina Loring."

"He's profoundly interesting. Mynheer Knoppe was telling me about some stolen turnips he traced only last week. No wonder your husband values him more than—more than ——"

"Anybody."

"Anybody. And I can't say that I admire Mevrouw Loring. There was nothing to be done for her. I couldn't get her alimony, or the children, or anything!"

"How could you go into it!" exclaimed Eva with a shudder.

"Professional interest. The very desperation of the case, and the hope of finding *something*. As, of course, one always does. Only, the other party wouldn't see it. I ended up by telling Loring's lawyer I should have done just the same myself."

"Cissie, did you feel that?"

"It's always a good thing to say," replied Cissie coolly. "And only a woman can say it. Mine's a queer trade for a girl to go into—oh, I know you're

thinking that. You agree with Mynheer your husband, then. It's fine woman's work. As you'd have felt, were you Nina Loring."

"Thank Heaven, I'm not!"

"Hmph!" ejaculated Miss Brent. "A certain Pharisee went up into the temple to pray."

"Oh no, not that! Not that! I meant: I thank Heaven that I don't even understand, that I've never had the temptation, that I love my husband. Love Rutger with all my heart and soul!"

"My dear child, how excited you get! Living out here has made you shockingly nervous!" Miss Brent, who had risen and stood away, suddenly flung her arms round her dear friend's neck. "I'm a brute!" she cried. "As if I didn't know all you've suffered! As if we hadn't been together to the little grave this morning! I'm a brute of a legal woman, Eva! I might almost have been an attorney!" She lay with her keen little face against Eva's soft one. "When you're in trouble," she said, "keep away from Cissie Brent."

I'm in a kind of a sort of a little trouble," stuttered Eva. "It's about my sister."

"And my brother," said Cissie promptly. "There's nothing in it. I went into it. You may believe me. Theo gave me all his locks of hair to burn, when he left."

"And Marthe's wasn't among them?"

"Indeed, it was. That's just it. There were all colours from black to straw. Half a dozen. But he sailed for the Indies heart-whole."

"I don't understand that sort of love-making," said Eva.

"You needn't. It isn't love: it's flirtation. Mynheer Aansmeer has got another money-man for Bessie. She was ashamed to write to you, because he is a Greek. As if it mattered what religion a Paris broker is! Well, I promised to call with Marthe and Mynheer Gallas on the parson's wife. I do like to see a thorough fool of a woman once in a way! They're so rare."

"You like Mynheer Gallas?" said Eva.

Cissie reflected. "Yes," she answered. "Chiefly because I like his sister. He has his sister's suggestion that you should like them. Neither you nor they exactly know why."

"A good definition of fascination," said Eva in a low voice.

"Is it? Oh no, fascination's a dreadful word. As bad as that other absurd one: charm."

"Give my love to Mevrouw Dickert," said Eva. She remained almost motionless for a long time, watching the twinkle in the wainscot. Then she rose heavily and went across to her piano.

"I don't intrude?" questioned Melissant. "I heard you playing. Don't leave off."

"Oh yes," she said. "Come and sit beside me. What have you been doing with yourself?"

"Examining things, with Gallas. I have been good. But now, when we tried billiards, I came away."

"Yes, he doesn't play well. Nor bridge. He can't keep cool. But Rutger finds him first-rate at his work. And work, not play, is Rutger's ideal."

"Beautiful—in an age of games! And, after all, Rutger is a champion bridge-player, so we will forgive him. He's a fine chap, is Rutger. I'm delighted that Fritz has taken to him so! A far safer guide than I! I shall probably surrender and let the boy come under him!"

"And mother—you are satisfied with her condition?"

"Far from it, but she is, or pretends to be. So what am I to do? I who never feel an ache or a pain. Except after too much riding or too much dinner. I know nothing of doctors. I sent one of the gardeners to our greatest man at Nieburg the other day, and he treated him for a broken leg."

"Well, if it was a broken leg?"

"But it wasn't; it was typhoid. So what is your poor mother to do? Go on playing, Eva. If you stop, I can't."

He lay back smoking his cigarette. And he toyed with the ring that Sherlock had recovered, listlessly listening.

"What was that?" he said, when she paused. "I have never heard you play like that before."

"I was half-way through when you came in. It is called the 'Appassionata.'"

"Oh! play that last bit but one again, will you, Kiddie? You—you play it very well."

She struck a few notes in nervous haste, upset by a term of endearment she had only heard once or twice on great occasions, in her life. Then she steadied her touch and played on. Presently he slipped down to his wife. "She's in love with her husband at last," he said.

"At last?" repeated Mevrouw Melissant. "How do you mean that? Did you ever doubt it?"

"Oh, I don't know. She's a woman: I know that. A real, live beautiful woman. With a great glowing soul at her fingers' ends. Life's a glorious thing! I'm so glad for her sake!"

"You exaggerate," said Mevrouw Melissant. "Women like us don't find life glorious. We leave that to men and to ballet-girls."

"Madam," rejoined Melissant. "You are ready to meet my lady Bigi."

A couple of hours later these two types of womanhood sat contrasted on the same little sofa. The Dowager was straight and black, with fine lace and diamonds: Mevrouw Melissant undulated in a silver shimmer: like a middle-aged mermaid, said—no, thought—the Freule Margot.

They were a large party, sixteen or eighteen. Rutger had persuaded several male provincials to don the evening clothing which reduced them to fatuous misery: they had come in sheer kindness: he was popular with his friends. His wife they admired without approval, and indeed, at this moment, they mingled with the Melissants as ditchwater mingles with oil.

"She isn't dull: never fear: she adores you!" Lourens had said to his son-in-law, just before dinner, in a moment of effusion. "You forget that. It makes all the difference."

Rutger melted at once. "I hardly dare take it into account. My one fear is that she must bore herself. I worry about it. Things would have been so different, if ——" Rutger turned away to right a lamp-shade. "The wretched doctor says she will never have another chance."

"What?" exclaimed Melissant. He recovered his equanimity. "Children are a nuisance. That youngest boy of mine ——"

Eva entered. Very young, very lovely, in scarce tinted pale-blue brocade. "Is anything wrong? What made father cry out?" She laughed from one to the other. "Oh, Rutger always fidgets over the lamps!"

"Mynheer Gallas!" announced the butler behind her.

"Here is a man whom we don't want to be dull," said Knoppe.

"The Baroness Bigi van Tietstjumperadeel and the Freule! Baron Bonk!" Half an hour later, when they were all seated round the table, the dull talk was of dulness all the time. For the curious fact about these provincials is that, whilst they resent any attempt at gaiety, they consider it their duty to complain of dulness to any visitor from elsewhere.

"No theatre at Kykstad?" said Melissant. "No; there wouldn't be. But you have your dramatic clubs in all the villages, of course."

"We have in ours," said Baron Bonk. "As in most places. How about Skilda?"

"There used to be one, but it died out," explained Rutger. "My predecessor had a taste for the drama."

"I thought every Dutch village had its theatre club," said Melissant, "with all the yokels making love on the stage."

"God forbid!" said the Dowager.

"We had, at home," remarked the Freule Imka,

lifting the bosom which bore the great grandmother's brooch. "It came down straight from 1640, and had celebrated the Peace of Munster by a Masque of Concord and Liberty. I took a part in its bi-centenary. I was Joy."

"I am very sorry to hear it," said the Dowager.

"The under-groom was Wine. He kissed Joy. He smelt of brandy. I remember it as if it was yesterday," said the Freule.

"It ought to be revived here!" cried Gallas. "I mean the society. They're everywhere. We had a very good one at Rajaroedi."

"You might undertake it," replied Rutger. "It would keep you from feeling dull."

So there was a consensus. Only the Baroness shook her head till a ball from the enormous comb on it dropped into her plate. It made a loud click and a great silence: everybody expected a speech.

"It won't hurt our friend's candidature," remarked, in the after-dinner smoke, Baron Bonk to Baron Duff. Why should it? The arabesques of electoral prejudice can be traced, not explained, by the learned in human folly. A dress from Paris is quite naturally an injustice. But why should a library be an evil, and a dramatic society the reverse?

The peasant mind replies, in the darkness, that it had heard of the society before.

"Do you like the idea?" Rutger had laid his heavy hand on his wife's bare shoulder, where she stood conversing with her father and Fritz. She turned: "Oh, is it you? What plan? The dramatic society? Yes, certainly."

"Of course it was I. Who else could it have been?" The other two men laughed hilariously. Rutger joined in with ruffled brows. She waited till they had quite done: then she answered quietly: "Mom." She left them: he had set her thinking.

CHAPTER XXIX

"We can have heaps more things from Sans-Souci. Father will be delighted to lend them." Eva sat in the middle of the unpackings. Gallas pushed the boxes aside.

Eva's eyes shone. The dream had become meat and wine to her, a daily banquet of make-believe amidst the moody materialism of Skilda. A whole world of the emotions in fancy, with its immediate parody on the stage.

They had been hard at it for three weeks. The winter was over. They must get their first performance through—better late than never—in May.

Udo Gallas had fired the villagers with his enthusiasm. He had done almost everything, with Eva, in a daily *tête-à-tête.* The demands of the company had been few but emphatic. Unlike greater actors, they accepted their parts and their clothes. But they stipulated, as a *sine qua non,* that the piece must move in the very highest circles, preferably French. The pork-butcher's son and the Socialist under-schoolmaster were the rival heroes, a count and a marquis, officers both. And the Freule Lexma's pretty maid was the young heiress. She had cried, because her father was only Cotton-mills. So Gallas had good-naturedly made him into a quite recent (Papal) baron, thereby considerably vitiating the whole tenour of the plot.

"Nonsense!" said Gallas. "It only wants fifteen thousand francs, which we haven't got to pay. See her smile!"

Aunt Imka, duly informed, said the pope was even a worse person than she'd ever known.

Duly informed, indeed! The whole neighbourhood

knew everything that was said and done, and a great deal more.

"*What* is the name of the piece?" demanded the Baroness Bigi. "'The Course of True Love'? Very original. Well, it certainly won't run smooth." She ordered the book, quietly, from the Hague. She read it through on the night it came. She said it was "disgusting."

It didn't run smooth. Mevrouw Dickert joined the opposition, secretly, in sneer and innuendo, for sake of Gallas. She had coveted the part of the lovely heiress, and ascribed the Dominé's unexpectedly stern veto to Eva. "She must be two-thirds mad," said almost everybody. As indeed she was, by this time.

The Dominé remained in full possession of his faculties. He called on Gallas one dark evening with a bundle under his arm. "It is the manuscript," he said, "of my seven-act play 'The Maid of Mesopotamia.' It would have to be produced anonymously, of course. Shall I read it to you?"

"Do," said Gallas, glancing at the clock.

"It will take some time," remarked the "Rabbi" suspiciously.

"Never mind that!" See how far we get! Mynheer Knoppe is coming to fetch me in ten minutes."

The Dominé scrambled to his feet. "Not for worlds!" he stammered. "I tell you, it's—an absolute—mystery! Mum's the word. I wrote the play at college. This looks like my one opportunity. Mynheer Melissant has supplied you with funds, I hear? You could have had exquisite costumes." The Dominé stumbled against various pretty objects which littered Mynheer Gallas's modest lodgings. "You yourself would have been Na-boo-koo-doo-noo"—the Dominé sat down, manuscript and all, in the waste-paper basket—"sar."

"I beg your pardon," said Gallas politely, without moving. "Was there any more of it? Never mind: we shall leave all the acting to the villagers."

"Well, you will see. It revives the whole wonder of dead Babylon—not the splendour, of course, but quite simply, the curious old-world love-thoughts. Laban is an analogy. However, I must be going."

"Mynheer Knoppe is very punctual," said Udo. "If the thing were traced to you, you couldn't stay here?"

"It won't be traced; and I don't intend to stay," replied the "Rabbi." "Where shall I put the manuscript?"

"Oh, not in the waste-paper basket!" said Gallas. His little note, three days later, pointing out that a masterpiece requires masterly presentation, only very partly satisfied the Dominé.

Presentation at Skilda was far from masterly, as the eager management discovered with every fresh rehearsal. All the more, when the date had been fixed and drew rapidly nearer. The little play was really a pretty thing, not original in plot, but bright and cleanly, too dependent on the charm and lightness with which its simple points must be put. Gallas worked himself into a fever over the sluggish flow of cow-land sentiment. He tried to explain, to argue, a dozen times, in the bare school-room, where the stage was to be placed.

"You stand here," he said, desperately. "Now, remember, we have only four days more! You stand here and your love comes by the corner!" It was a May afternoon, bright and mild! the lilacs looked in, drooping round the window. Eva passed.

"There is Mevrouw Knoppe!" He ran out to her. "You're coming in, aren't you?—to help?"

She hesitated. "I don't know. I was going to inquire——"

"Oh don't. Come and help me! I am at my wit's end. I told you last night how bad they are!"

She followed him with lagging feet.

On the bare boards, against the white-washed wall, stood the red pork-boy, his hands enormous, and the pretty maid, a-snigger.

"Don't you see?" gasped Udo. "You must let her feel, without saying it, that you love her. Let's try again!" They tried.

"It's much simpler to say it," remarked the young butcher. He had been selected—they had to keep him—for his looks.

"Yes, but if you said it, she would be frightened, and run away—wouldn't you?"

"Lor, yes!" said the maid.

"Try again! You stand here, and put forward one leg—about a foot—no, not a yard! And you look round—no, the other way—where she comes! 'Good morning, Mejuffrouw!'" He turned to Eva. 'It sounds dreadfully heavy—'Mejuffrouw'—where it ought to be 'Mademoiselle.'"

"Marie-Lise is pretty enough presently, when he says it."

"Well—not, when he says it. Now, fire away!"

There was no fire, barely fizzle.

"Look here, let me show you?"—he pushed the substantial butcher back, with a nervous thrust. He took the stage. "We know the piece by heart. I could dream it all. Mevrouw is away yonder. Now, watch, both of you! Here she comes!"

The maid and the boy drew aside. Udo stood trembling with suppressed annoyance and agitation. "Now, listen to us! See how we do it! You *must* be better, next week!"

Eva laughed. "You want me to come round the corner?" she asked. And again she laughed.

"Yes, please do! Have pity on me! It's our last chance! Marie-Lise comes round the corner, and I quickly look away. You always look away too late!"

"Because I'm in love," said the sullen butcher.

"So we begin! Ah!—I looked away too late that time." He stepped forward, endeavouring to calm himself. "Now!"

The maid and the lad stood watching him. "What a lovely morning!" he spouted. "Oh, what a dreadful

thing it is to be in love!" He turned. "Of course they'll laugh. But you *mustn't*. I don't. I know how true it is. I *feel* it. Oh what a dreadful thing it is to be in love!"

"But it isn't so *very* dreadful!" hazarded the giggly maid.

"Isn't it? You try. Besides, you're a woman. It's dreadful for a man. What say you, Mevrouw?"

"We're not out here to discuss the subject," answered Eva, in a strained voice.

He bit his lip—a nervous trick. "The acting turns on the proper emotion! Isn't the sunshine glorious? And the smell of the lilacs? I know that isn't in the play. "How dreadful—Ah, good morning, Mejuffrouw! I turn now, again, you see—and suddenly I meet the eyes of the woman I love!" His voice broke down: he recovered himself immediately. "That's the tone, you see—and the expression!" He hurried on with the by-play and the dialogue. "Now, presently, Mevrouw says: I don't understand what you mean. Speak plainer!—do you not, Mevrouw? Listen!"

"I don't understand what you mean. Speak plainer!" faltered Eva.

"You heard that? That is just the tone! That is perfect. And now comes my answer. I cannot speak plainer. For to speak plainer—my God!—is to speak too plain!" He turned his back on them. He stood staring out of the window, into the sunlight, through the lilac-blooms.

"Must I turn my back too?" queried the lad.

Udo flung round. "No! You needn't do it all with Mejuffrouw exactly as I do it with Mevrouw. But you must get the tone!"

"I can't," said the butcher. "You do it as if it were real. I can't forget that it's make-believe."

"Fall in love with me, then!" laughed the maid.

"That is enough. They have seen now. I am going," said Eva. She spoke low and swiftly. She nodded to the two actors. She passed out leaving the door wide open behind her.

CHAPTER XXX

In the street she met Rutger, driving his motor. He stopped.

"You haven't heard yet," he said, bending sideways, "about Gallas?"

"No? What?" she breathed. The car seemed to surge up in front of her. She feared, with an agony of angry self-betrayal, that he was engaged.

"No, of course he wouldn't bother you. He is going to leave us. He has had enough of tobacco." Rutger spoke bitterly. "He told me this morning. He wants—ridiculous!—to fly."

"To fly?"

"In a machine, of course," said Rutger testily. "He says—which is true enough—that the pioneer work is finished here. I have just come back from the big field: you can hear the plants grow! And he says he has found his vocation, at last."

"Has he tried it? Does he know?"

"He saw the whole thing at Nieburg last week. Your father was especially interested. Pretending, of course, not to care."

"Rutger, are you going home? Let me have the motor. I want to take a long drive. To get a lot of fresh air!"

"Very well," he said, extricating himself, "I wish I could come with you. You won't be back for tea?"

"How can I? It's near four. Ask Aunt Imka to give you some."

"All right. What a blessing it is she stayed near us, dear old thing! I am anxious about her. Yesterday she said she felt tired."

"She is eighty-seven!" said Eva.

"That's just it. She's never told me she was tired, before."

"She meant 'bored,'" said Eva, quivering, her hand on the car door.

"Do you think so? That's quite possible! Bonk had been a full hour with her!"—Rutger's brown face shone. "I'm glad you said that. You always think of nice things, and cheer a fellow up, Eva! Don't make him drive you too fast! Remember, the whole neighbourhood watches the burgomaster's wife!"

The chauffeur started the machine, with the air of a man resuming his legal rights. Rutger thrust his head into the car. "Perhaps *you* could make Gallas change his mind; *that*'d be doing me a good turn. I've talked in vain!" The car was off before she had answered. "Anywhere!" she said. Anywhere for a good straight run! Long after, she unhooked the speaking-tube again. "To Volda!"

The motor, released from its master, raced, regardless of officialdom. But in Eva's ears the phrase rankled: "the whole neighbourhood watches the burgomaster's wife." She lifted her head proudly, the cheeks burning. It was true enough, naturally: but that wasn't the worst.

The worst is myself, she said again and again. In a moment, as it seemed to her, she had reached Volda church. The chauffeur, without further instructions, took her there.

"Yes," she said. "After all, that was what I meant. I don't know why."

But she stood outside the building for a long time, talking to the deaf and dumb sacristan, the carver.

For she was able to talk to him, up to a point. She had long ago, not mastered, but combated her dread. The man had one subject, one only, of which he never tired, his saints. The dolls he had carved, with their attributes—their story in the one book he always read, the Lives. Father Bredo had given him the now much besmudged black volume. He was never

seen without it: when he worked, it lay open, an inspiration, by his side.

Eva would start him, by placing an interrogatory hand on some image in or outside the building. Then he would gurgle on, in a loud jumble of guttural sounds. She caught less than a quarter, but he was always ready to begin over again. Sometimes the Father would issue from his dwelling to release her. "It wears you out," said the Father, "but it is a good work"—he smiled—"if you may believe in good works."

"They do not admit us," said Eva, "but I don't suppose they keep us out? I never heard of these differences before I came to Skilda!"

"Do not mind the differences, dear daughter. Listen to the Lives of the Saints!"

She did so gladly. The lives of the saints had a wonderful increasing charm for Eva. They were a new world for her, the wide outlook, lifted high by a new power. The life of miracle and sacrifice, the life in God for mankind. The field blossoming with lilies where hitherto had been a stone court in which the rich stood like tubbed evergreens. She, listening, straining to fashion the sounds into sense. On no account would she have acquired the book and easily read it. Nor did the Father offer to get it for her. "Yes," she nodded. "Yes—again! His mansion—gave his mansion—*cut* his mansion?—oh, his mantle!—so he cut off half his mantle. That was very fine of him!" She looked down her long ulster. It would make a very unbecoming jacket, cut short.

To-day she could not listen at all: she could not catch his meaning: there was a film before her eyes, a buzzing in her head. The soft sunshine spread its warmth through the tracery of the chestnuts: the moist earth seemed awakening to meet it in this lengthening of the daylight. Summer was coming, for winter was slain.

She stole into the church. Hermus had observed her inattention, the barrier between them: he had

grown angry, swiftly fierce, when not lowering, at all times. He had flung the mild words, like imprecations, till they struck, as against a wall. She could hear him still, muttering aloud, in the porch, with those horrible knotted lips. She had been afraid to enter, but she was safer now here than outside. She listened awe-struck to the roll of threats and curses, though she knew their tale was gentle: "and the basket was full of roses, white and red."

She sat in the church, under the shadows, dead-tired. Yonder, by the chancel-railings Gallas had knelt. "I am not praying!" he had said. Foolish, honest fellow! She was vexed with him, and afraid. The lives of the saints were dead within her: she only heard the voice of her husband: "try to keep him: you will do me a good turn."

The church was so dim and silent: the figures stood everywhere, staring. They were small, most of them, half hidden in the scroll-work. She went round to the larger, smooth-faced Madonna, at the back.

The mutterings in the entry suddenly ceased. Father Bredo's step came up the aisle, came behind the high altar. "I do not disturb you?" he said.

"No. I wasn't thinking of anything. It doesn't matter."

"Hermus is a strange creature. You mustn't mind his way."

"No. He is a strange creature. I don't mind."

"Shall I open the Madonna for you? You can't manage the spring."

"No, please don't! Not to-day! No, I have no right to the secret."

"Nobody knows it but Hermus and I." The priest hesitated, looming large, beside her, in his long black coat and bright buckles. He had taken no account of her moods, but now he said:

"It is almost as if you feared the inner face?"

She looked up at him. "The outer face is best for all of us. It doesn't do to peep inside."

He didn't press her. Manifestly there was much to

reply: he did not speak it. All he said was in quite a trivial tone:

"Have you never been to the singing at Rexlo? It might be worth your while."

"What is the singing at Rexlo? I never even heard of it."

"No: your half of the world doesn't know how our other half lives. It is the Sisters of the Convent of Unceasing Supplication. They sing at sunset. But possibly you don't know there is a convent? Or where Rexlo is? On the other side"—he pointed—"towards Germany. Fifteen miles east." He kept the irony out of his voice, with an effort. This country which had been entirely Catholic, all over convents, once!

"I didn't know," she said humbly. "Fifteen miles is rather far!"

"It is—per bicycle. Not per motor."

"Van Drill van Rexlo," she said, dimly reminiscent.

"Yes, that is the family—you would know *that*. The old house is now a convent. Not very suitable. Women can go to the singing, not men."

She got up. "I will go," she said. "Is it to-day? I should like to hear it. Shall I be in time?"

"It is every day. Before sunset. Yes, you will be in time."

She walked back to the motor. He followed, to direct the chauffeur. He stood watching the car in its long dwindle down the endless line of straight gravel. Between the furrowed fields.

"It is the psychological moment," he said. His old eyes were moist.

Even per motor, even with a chauffeur delighted to escape from burgomastery, even upon an even road, a fifteen mile run through desolate country affords occasion for thought. But Eva saw the nestling mass of Rexlo, white buttressed against water, before she had thought at all. She wanted to break away, to get there, to see something fresh, to be filled with a new emotion before she went home.

The place was absolute desolation. The ugly lump of the old barrack-like building, along the shiny moat, among flat fields. Stillness under the pale spring sky. A gaunt fringe of grey poplars between two gleams of ditch.

The chapel, also white, had been built out, without ornament, plain and common, like the rest. An old woman, rimpled and blear-eyed; a dark-shawled hag, with the dull gaze of bigotry, came to the locked gate, in the door.

"Yes, you can enter," she said, "if you're sure you want to. The man can't." The chauffeur laughed.

Eva followed the janitress. "Upstairs!" said that worthy, and said no more.

Wooden steps—a railed ladder—led up into a stone niche, little more. It was darkened and caged by a wooden grating, and contained six unoccupied chairs. On one of these Eva seated herself and peered down into the nave.

The chapel was narrow and lofty, out of all proportion. Its walls were a dull chalk. Its heavily-leaded yellow windows could never admit much light. It contained no side-chapels but the chancel, nor any side-altar except the stations, in hideous lithograph, of the cross. In the chancel, which was also devoid of all subventional decoration, an enormous crucifix, shrilly painted on wood, hung more than half-way down from the tall ceiling, filling with a great glaring agony the major part of the arch. It was the one point to which all eyes, all thoughts must converge. None in that building, however hardened, however careless, could realise anything but the sacrifice of God.

Such was the sanctuary. On the stone floor, behind rush-stools knelt the nuns.

To Eva the whole thing was a sudden wonder. Amazing to find that here, comparatively close by the Dutch daily home-life, as she knew it, existed this dream of extraneous emotion, alien in origin, alien in utterance, alien even in the larger number of its

devotees. She felt as if travelling abroad. And the feeling did her good.

The long wait, like a numbness, was broken by the soft inset of the organ. Its first frail notes felt their tremulous way into the chill repose of the fixed figures below.

Then, quite suddenly, all rose to their feet, and their singing began.

It was a singing of voices well-trained to sing, but, far more, it was an utterance of hearts all-tuned to adore. The thought of the singers blended as purely as their music. The organ died away into silence: the voices, in crystal-clear unison, sang on.

Eva listened. She had never heard good church music, of which there is but little in Holland. The Melissants rarely appeared at a religious service: their frequent concerts were of the more frivolous kind. After her marriage Eva had made a point of attending the "Rabbi's" wearisome ministrations: the village church was icy in winter, suffocating in summer: at all times it hung heavy with a thick grey smell. Her illness had come as a welcome break.

She sat listening in the loneliness till the singing was over. It did not last long, a half-hour before the evening meal. The church was a great deal darker than the fresh air outside. The singing sank away into the shadows. In the great hush that followed the bell-like notes seemed to linger about the refulgent Christ. The nuns dropped in long prayer, then stole, one by one, noiselessly out.

A single light burned at the far end of the empty building. Eva crept from behind her grating, past the irresponsive guardian of the double-locked gate.

The chauffeur, out beyond the narrow poplars and dull water, talked brightly of various routes. He advocated a fine road, a round-about, "fine" of course not applying, in chauffeur parlance, to the scenery but only to the road-work. "No, no," said Eva, "straight back by Volda, as quickly as we can." The chauffeur

grinned at the "we," as he rushed through the evening light.

He drove with that free hold which women love. Lightly, recklessly, with a clear consciousness of limit, the resolution, all the time, to "reck," all right, when he must. And so, although he was going nearly forty miles an hour at the moment, he didn't run over Gallas at the turn of the Volda road.

"Whew!" cried Gallas, following fast on his motor-cycle. "You use your chance, when you get it, my lad."

The motor stopped. "I sympathise," said Gallas. "The blood spirts!" He stood by the car-door. "Yes, I followed you," he said. "Well, not exactly. I have been to the plantation—to my work. I heard the car had gone to Volda. I came by here. I was glad to meet you. I was afraid you were annoyed."

"Annoyed?" she said coldly. "No. Why? You should not have come to meet me. That was quite unnecessary. Quite."

He remained non-plussed. Only for a moment. Then he said, in a much relieved tone: "But I had my reason, a very good one. Boldekker will be passing here in a few minutes. He is overdue. He telegraphed to me an hour ago, just after you—left."

"I don't understand at all. It is already quite late."

"The afternoons are so long. There's a fine after-glow. Boldekker, the famous flyer. He was at Nieburg. I tried his machine all last week. He's practising for his champion flight to Harwich."

"Oh?"

"Didn't you know?" He stepped back in astonishment.

"I fear not. I must have missed it, in the papers. We were never taught to read the paper properly at home."

"But you care?"

"Very much. Will he really come past?"

"I am so glad you care! It is the most absorbing

thing of the century. Motoring's stupid, compared with it. I—I can think of nothing else, since I've seen it. Felt it, handled it. Felt the great bird throbbing under me. I haven't really flown yet. He was to start from Kykstad at five. The evening's always best. Something must have delayed him. The wind's perfect." Gallas turned again to scan the horizon. She saw his lithe figure against the motor-cycle, his clear profile, his dark cheek against the light.

They were silent.

So long that she struggled to snap the tension. "How interesting!" she said at last.

Gallas did not answer, intently staring. "Here he comes!" he cried.

"Yes," said the chauffeur.

Eva sprang from the car. In the distance, over the boundless fields, through the twilight, a black speck had been approaching, now suddenly recognisable as such. Very rapidly, for in the glooming it was much nearer than they fancied, the stain thickened, still diminutive, on the pallor of the sky. Already they could distinctly hear the whirr of its mechanism. It came on.

"I knew he must pass here," said Gallas with bated breath.

They watched, the three of them, on the white road, in the vast fields.

The thing was close upon them, high above them, near, by its noise and its comparative blackness, in spite of the altitude. An air-monster, like a transparent worm, for it was a biplane, flimsy yet oppressive in its flight. As it went by, with a continuous gir-r-r, like a rattle, they could see the man's form, very vague. They looked after it. Very rapidly it trailed west, out of sight.

"Well?" said Udo.

"It is wonderful," answered Eva, "beyond words."

"It's my future. I'm going in for it. Heart and soul. Besides, what else have I left to go in for?"

"Yes, go in for it. That's right. Will it take you to

Nieburg? Or to Paris?" I was glad to hear you say just now that you can think of nothing else."

"You know how I meant that," he said darkly.

"Yes. I am sure you meant it, quite wisely, and honourably, as a man like you would. You will do your duty by my husband."

"Oh yes," he burst out, "I will do my duty by your husband. Oh, never fear—I have always done that!"

"About the tobacco," she struggled on. "And when you leave after the play next week, our best wishes will go with you. We shall read—yes, I shall read in the newspapers of your fame."

"Thanks," he said still in the same fierce tone. "Yes, that is good of you—your best wishes will go with me. That is kind. And my best wishes are with your husband. And therefore also with you."

She was a good woman, but she was a woman. She would have said no more. "Of course. Therefore," she said.

"Yes. It's beautifully natural. Like most things that should never have been."

"I must go home," she said. She called to the chauffeur; she entered the motor.

"One word only! "Don't be sorry—please not—that you came here. You have helped him a lot."

"God forbid I should be sorry," he said, and bent over his machine. With a hideous clang the chauffeur banged the car-door.

She leant back: the dry film before her eyes prevented her seeing the straight flatness of the empty fields. Not once but a dozen times she repeated to herself: "Try to keep him; you will do me a good turn; try to keep him—try to—try to—" till the music of the nuns of Rexlo wiped the wearying words away.

CHAPTER XXXI

THE evening of the first performance will live in the annals of the flourishing dramatic club. Chiefly because of Mynheer Gallas' supper and speech to the performers. "He was a good sort, he was!" they say still. The pork-butcher proposed to the pretty maid on the way home. He married her. There have been proposals without subsequent marriage in and after various performances since.

"Her acting was excellent—too excellent," said the Freule Imka, who considered herself responsible for her servant's success. "Everyone could see she was in love with him all the time, but that, I understand, is the rule on the stage. On the stage only the lover doesn't know, and in real life he knows also. No woman can hide her sentiments."

Gallas looked up.

"Or she hasn't got them," snapped the Freule, tatting.

"You say that? You are sure? I daren't contradict but——"

"You mean that I have no experience? I have. I was engaged, in 1843, to the only young man in our neighbourhood. He married someone else, who made him very happy. He died in 1870, the year of the great war."

"But a woman hides," persisted Udo,—"an honest woman—a love—she is ashamed of——"

"She hides it like my little maid did—you can see it all the time."

"Everybody?" exclaimed Udo aghast.

"The people who look. The people who care. Everybody doesn't take tickets for every comedy that's

going on. Fortunately. And of course there's an exception that proves the rule. The husband, for instance. They say there's a special guardian, up on high, for children and drunkards. There certainly is one, with a big bandage, for husbands. Did I ever tell you about my old cousin Rikstra, the 'garde d'honneur' of the great Napoleon?"

"No," gasped Udo. How much did this dear dreadful old woman surmise?

"The man had bribed his wife's maid—but here is my nephew: he has heard the story so often, I really must spare him. Rutger, we are discussing the duplicity of women. Mynheer Gallas thinks they can deceive, and I don't."

"You judge people by your own innocent heart," answered Rutger. "And Gallas by the stage."

"And you by your experience of the sex, before you doffed your uniform." The Freule smiled. She had always fancied him a Don Juan and loved him for it.

"No woman ever deceived me," said Rutger. "I never asked them to. Or not to. I have known good women and bad. So has Gallas, no doubt. And not always cared to distinguish. Is Eva coming?"

"I don't think so. She looked in at the window, and went off again. Not very nice of her."

"She knows nothing—not yet!" decided Gallas rightly. "I am leaving to-morrow," he said. "A day earlier than I thought."

"Are you very angry with him, Rutger?" asked the ever indiscreet Freule. If he is, let him give him a piece of his mind in my presence, she thought.

But Rutger was both too kind-hearted and too proud. "If he's found a career, let him take to it and go on with it. He's helped me through the worst. It's a new thing, and a fine thing—this flying!"

"To me it says nothing," replied the Freule, translating a French idiom. "It is a sport!"

"For gentlemen," said Gallas.

"Possibly. In my time there was but one sport for gentlemen—the chase."

"It is more than that: it is a great military possibility," said Rutger.

His grand-aunt yawned. "*That* would have interested me greatly had you stuck to your soldiering. I am always sorry—well, well, it can't be helped. I should have liked to see you a field-marshal and married to a princess: have you a grand-aunt, Mynheer Gallas?"

"I have an adoring sister," said Udo gently. "She is going to pay for my first flying machine. I shall come and fetch you for a trip, Freule."

"No, thank you! My first flight will be heavenwards. I don't know in what flying machine that will be?"

"The Wright machine," said Rutger. This reply fell in silence. Udo never laughed at Rutger's jokes, and the Freule let slip unlifted whatever lay beyond her reach. But for this happy quality, as Mevrouw Dickert constantly pointed out, she would not have been as old as she was! So the burgomaster had his laugh to himself.

"All the same, I expect to make money out of it!" said Udo, rising. "I'm going in for Hook to Harwich and back. The prize is four thousand pounds."

"Four—thousand—pounds of what?" sobbed the Freule.

"Gold. Sterling. Hard cash."

"Well!" said the Freule. "Do you know what I'm doing this tatting for? The people who come tumbling out of the sky. I think I'll stop."

The two men, as they walked away, heard her mumbling, "Quite mad." "She doesn't mean you," said Rutger pleasantly. "She means the world in general. She used to care till she was about seventy, and want to improve it. Fortunately she left off, when the old King died."

"Why? said Udo. "Do you think those children ought to stone that cat?"

"Little brutes!" shouted the burgomaster. "I don't know. She said it was a new era. Younger people must do the worrying now."

"Fancy worrying about the world!"

"Yours is a cheerful temperament. That's much better than fancying you're wanted. I hate the thing myself: I know it's insane. But some people's lives are quite spoilt by the craze to do something useful. And—you see—they'd be wretched if they left off." Rutger stared at his buoyant companion: a semi-ashamed smile settled round the burgomaster's heavy moustache.

"You've got the tobacco. It'll do a lot of good here. You're a better man than I—a great deal better. Your life's—well, you deserve to be happy over it. I hope you are."

"You helped me with the tobacco," said Rutger, freezing. "Come in presently to tea, and to say goodbye."

"Thanks. I hope you will be there?"

"Oh certainly. And I shall see you to-morrow in any case."

Rutger entered his own house. He nodded to the dog. "Why did you go away again, Eva? Aunt Imka didn't like it."

"I was tired."

"Then you needn't have looked in at the window!"

"I didn't look in. I passed. Don't bother me, Rutger. I am sure I do my duty to Aunt Imka. Quite."

"I am sorry you find her such a burden. For my sake she ——"

"Yes. I know. And I try to thank her daily."

"Eva, how rude you are!" He began walking up and down the room.

"Don't please do that! I have no wish to be rude. I'd rather be wicked. But I'm only dead-tired, Rutger. Say it's the spring."

"You must rest," he said gently. "Put your feet

up. I'm always so sorry for people who feel tired. It must be horrid. Shall I pidjit your neck?"

"Oh no—no!" She shrank back. "I'm all right. Margot Bigi's been here. She ——"

"Oh, I'm sorry I was out!" Eva waited a moment, neutralising her voice. "So am I. You would have answered her better than I. More kindly than I."

"Oh, I trust you weren't rude to her, Eva!"

"You seem to think I am easily rude. She disapproved of the acting. All acting. Theatres. Make-believe. Of course it was her mother's opinion. Voice. She is just a gramophone."

"She means well. You are very hard on her. You must admit that she is charming, Eva. I should so like you to be friends."

"Charming is the last word I should have thought of. Sweet. Good. Staid. Pure. Virtuous—the whole catalogue of tiresome adjectives, if you like."

"I don't agree with you," he said stiffly. "We must agree to differ. Fortunately the matter is of small account."

"What?—*not* sweet, good, pure ——"

"May we stop? The Freule Bigi is, to my mind, exactly what one might expect, and hope, a Freule Bigi would be. I came in to tell you that I must spend a few days at Nieburg. You might write to your mother and ask her whether they could have us next week?"

She was silent.

"It's about the tobacco. If we are to succeed, on a large scale, we must have more money. I must speak with old Gallas."

She was silent.

"You will like to be at Sans-Souci. In the month of roses."

"No," she said. "I don't want to go to Sans-Souci."

"George!"

"Won't you ring for tea?"

"Eva, what's the matter? Not want to go to Sans-Souci? When you've always—no, I won't say that."

"I don't think I've always," she answered quietly. Her cheek flushed.

"Not go home? To your old home?" He couldn't help that.

"Not just now. It's beautiful here now also. I'd rather stay here."

"Alone with Sherlock?"

"Even that. Mother doesn't want me, I dare say. And you will be back in a few days."

Rutger shrugged his shoulders. "I have never pretended to understand the Melissant family," he said. "I had another piece of news. Old Baron Bonk, the uncle of the man you know, talks of retiring from the States Provincial. If the Clericals put me up, as they have promised, I shall get in."

"Oh, I am so glad!" Her face lighted up: she joined her hands, almost clapping them. "That is now! In June?"

"No, in the autumn. Political intrigue. I'll explain that another time, if you care."

"If I care? If I care? Oh, Rutger, how can you say that? Have I deserved it?"

He came to her very quickly. He kissed her on the forehead. "I only thought it wasn't fair to bother you. *I* care very much. I want to get on. Into Parliament. First the Province. Then the Country. A man can only do, and give, his best."

"I shall help you! You have promised! You will show me how!"

His face and voice grew puzzled. "Yes. I suppose so. I don't quite see. It isn't like in England or America. I don't think women have anything to do with elections or politics here. I never heard of it: did you? Only the Socialist ranters. Gallas was coming in to say good-bye. I must be going."

"Oh, stay and have tea! Stay! Stay for tea!"

"I can't. I've a council meeting. How late it is! I'm off."

It was later still, almost dark, when Udo found Eva by her waiting tea-table.

"I have been debating," he said, "whether I should come too early, or too late, or not at all."

"Would you ring for the lamps," she answered.

"So I have come too late." He seated himself. "I am afraid I have kept you out of your own room?"

"My husband had to attend a council meeting: he could not wait."

"I know."

"I will have some fresh tea made for you. He can bring it when he has done with the lamps."

"Yes, and then he can poke the fire—oh no, there isn't a fire!" cried Udo vehemently. "I have come in for a few words of farewell. I cannot forget that I have been in your sanctum, twice, the one you said you reserved for your friends."

"Do not forget it," she said. "I want you to remember it. That you are in the sanctum that I reserve for all my friends."

"Thanks," he said, still unamiably, "a sort of inner court, full of worshippers!"

"I know you don't take sugar. You mustn't demand too much. Everybody has a holy of holies, where nobody may intrude."

"Your memory deceives you. One person may."

She fought to keep the colour from her face. "I don't think we ought to talk like this. It is playing with sacred things. You must give my love to Celia. Will you learn to fly at Nieburg?"

"Yes. And I shall come here to show you. To take a turn with Aunt Imka!"

"My husband will be at Nieburg. Arrange that with him."

"You are coming?" A glad flame leaped from his throat.

"I stay here. Did Aunt Imka ——"

"No more tea, thanks. I want to go away. Forgive my interrupting you. I don't care a damn about Aunt Imka."

"Mynheer Gallas!"

"I care about saying good-bye. That's what I've come for. I'm doing it. Oh, I'll do it quickly. I care to thank you for letting me do it. For letting me care. For—for listening to me at all. It's all a blunder. I mean, I can't say it right. I didn't. And I thank you from the bottom of my idiot heart for letting me say it wrong."

He did not stop. He did not take her hand. He did nothing but go.

She sat long without moving. She heard the voices of the faithful servants quarrelling in the kitchen. A few tears rolled down her cheeks. They came slowly. She had wept so little in her life.

CHAPTER XXXII

RUTGER wrote from Sans-Souci that he must stay a good deal longer than he had at first intended. "It is easy enough now to get money," he wrote, "but not on conditions which benefit my peasantry. None of your relations here understand what you said about their not wanting you. On the other hand honesty obliges me to admit that they seem to get on very well without." This last sentence was dictated by a real feeling of umbrage and the longing to reconcile his wife to Skilda.

The same post brought a letter in an unknown hand. Baron Knoppe wrote:

"I can send you this, for I hear your husband is at Nieburg. The money he asks from Gallas he can have on reasonable terms. I shall certainly not befriend his poor, who are all doubtless socialists or sheep.

"The money for the mug you still have. One word more. I have made a will leaving all I possess to the eldest son of Rutger Knoppe. I shall never change my will. Remember, I am an old man. Knoppe."

Eva put the letter aside. She wrote a few words of acknowledgment to Baron Knoppe of Randik.

June had turned rainy. She sat much in the house, often listless for hours, with her work in her lap. Once, by a great effort, she took her old manuscript out of a drawer, re-read some of it—reached the most passionate part and tore the whole thing across. When she went out for a run "between the drops," she stumbled, in the dark entry, over the dog. He leered at her, and lay down again.

Mevrouw Dickert called to tattle. Like a fountain, bringing forth sweet and bitter water. Mevrouw

Dickert complained of Skilda, because it complained of the "Rabbi." And of Volda because its priest let the "Rabbi" severely alone. And of Mevrouw Bigi, because the lady had procured a list of the members of the dramatic club and then sent to every one of them a tract against acting. "Was that Christian?" demanded Mevrouw Dickert. Eva, although no authority, ventured to say she imagined not.

Mevrouw Dickert went home and said Mevrouw Burgomaster was looking ill. "No wonder," said the "Rabbi." "She has, like you and me, an intellect far above Skilda. We are like orange-trees in a potato-field. But from *my* fruit at least will be made marmalade. My article on the Confusion of Babel is coming out next month."

"And what have you proved?" asked Mevrouw Dominé, tying pink bows on a recalcitrant babe.

"Nothing" answered the "Rabbi," with pride. "Only ignorance *proves* things in Babelology. But at least I have proved, if you cling to the word, that the proofs of my opponents are wrong."

"More confusion than ever," said Mevrouw Dickert, kissing the baby. "What does it matter, after all?"

"Selena, if that doesn't matter, what does matter in the world?" replied her husband. "Tell me *that?*"

"Babies matter," said Mevrouw Dickert, in a burst of contrariness.

"I cannot agree with you. Babies are producible *ad libitum:* the supply of Babylonian relics, however large, is limited."

Mevrouw Dickert reflected, poising the baby in air. "Well," she said decidedly. "For you Babylon shall mean a better post than parson of Skilda!"

"I have always intended it should," remarked the Dominé.

"But it won't without my help," said Mevrouw Dickert. She nodded her still befeathered head and stuck a pin, as she often did, into the baby.

The parishioners of Skilda meanwhile meandered

through existence, and waited for the golden harvest of the tobacco-fields. Great, long, red-roofed barns had to be built for it, with loose wooden sides. The wide plain was full of work. All men praised the burgomaster.

Eva took many a slow stroll among the workers. She liked, in her loneliness, to talk to them, and to find out, as she had never done before, how they lived. Surreptitiously, now that her lord was away, she gave the school-children sweets and the sick people jellies. They began to look for her, to smile when she passed.

The weather cleared. June recovered its reputation. And the roses in her garden, which were chiefly of the tiresome kinds that rot in rain, took courage once more. On a splendid, glowing, sun-filled morning she met Margot Bigi among the cornfields. Waving grain was all round them, besprinkled with flowers.

"I was coming to see you," said the Freule. "Mamma thought I might."

"Why not?" answered Eva.

"Mynheer Knoppe said he would like us to be friends."

"So we are."

"Yes, but I mean, more intimate friends. Friends that 'are something to each other,' as they say."

"Yes," said Eva. "And now what could we be to each other, do you think?"

The Freule Margot looked a little disconcerted. But her breeding was perfect, and she had always been taught, in sharp contrast with her mother, to show the greatest consideration for everybody, as the Baroness believed that the Baroness did.

"Did my husband not tell you?" continued Eva.

"Well, he suggested, for instance, that we might read together. Some nice book."

"I thought so," said Eva, with far more bitterness in her heart than in her voice. "Have you chosen the book?"

"Have you ever read 'Jessica's First Prayer?'"

"Four times," said Eva. "It is a very nice book. To tell you the truth, Rutger has just been here from Saturday to Monday: he talked a great deal about you: he admires you very much. He advised the reading. Though he's hardly literary. He asked me to give you his—what was the word?—cordial greetings. He is going to the North of Italy and perhaps even to Hungary, to see the plantations there. It will be quite an event in his life: he has travelled so little. I am to stay here, because of the expense—and because I wanted to stay."

"I shouldn't like to travel in Hungary," said Margot. "Oh, I do hope he will be preserved in those outlandish parts."

"I imagine he will be," replied Eva. "Come and tell me as soon as you have selected another book."

She walked on. She sat down in a quiet corner of the roadside, against a clump of thistles and poppies. She talked to a child that came dawdling past and taught it the names of some wild-flowers around her. She sought to love other people's children, but she felt as if her lips were speaking outside herself. Her whole being was athirst for a love—of man or woman—which does not patronise and does not befriend.

The sun was high: the air was drowsy. The child had long vanished into the heat. She opened her eyes, where she lay, half-asleep. For she heard in the distance the strange whirr-r, like a great insect, that she had heard once before.

She started to her feet. Already the black speck loomed near in the blaze of blue heaven. As swiftly as a bird it came towards her. It passed over her head and was gone.

Sick and sad she turned homewards. At home were the faithful servants and Sherlock. And Freule Imka over the way.

By the entrance he stood in his aviator's costume with the tight-fitting cap.

"You see, I have come," he said.

She looked at him, straight into his eyes.

"Do I frighten you?" he asked. "It isn't becoming."

"You shouldn't," she said. She was resolved not to stammer. She stopped.

They stood facing each other, in awkward silence.

"I think it is becoming," she said. "It is a garb in which a man does and dares."

"It is glorious," he said. "You can't think how glorious it is. Nobody can, who hasn't tried."

"You have your machine here. I saw you pass."

"Did you? I should have waited till you came."

"That might have been impossible," she said with a glad pang. "I have often stayed out till night."

"It would not have been impossible. To-morrow I go to Paris. My try for the prize Hook to Harwich and back is next month. Do you think I could have some bread and meat out here in the verandah, and a glass of water? And then we must start."

"I will have some sandwiches made at once. Cook is proud ——"

"That'll take too long. Just the bread, please. I want you to try a flight with me—you will, won't you? Just a few minutes, for fun? I came on purpose."

"I? A flight?" She opened her eyes wide, submissive to his pleading air of command. He liked to see her thus.

"Isn't it dangerous? I haven't got the clothes!"

"Yes, it's dangerous. Just risky enough to give it a relish, not more. Any close-fitting things'll do, such as you might skate in. Won't you put them on whilst I eat this?"

She obeyed him, breaking loose from the *ennui* of her imprisonment. She followed him, almost without a word, to the desolate stretch of heathland on which the aeroplane, watched by two workmen, lay.

"Oh, but this one is much prettier," she said. "This is really like a bird."

"It's a monoplane. An Antoinette." He rested his hand affectionately on the framework. She had never

seen him so calm. "These are my own men; I sent them here by train. You see, I had reckoned on everything. Let us start at once, before the village yonder has woke from its midday sleep."

"I'll do it," she said. "Show me how!" She felt the flutter of her inmost longing, like the flutter of a prisoned moth in its cocoon. He guided her between the frail network of wood and steel, the electric wires, the copper pipes on both sides of her little seat. With a sigh of relief and expectation she settled down on the narrow plank in the triangle behind the motor, and stretched her legs. Curious pipes and wires curled under and around her; a sudden warmth (of the hot water) touched her side. Close in front, not two yards off, stood the big black motor, a great V-shaped mass of cylinders, like the head of the huge dragon-fly, between whose wings she now waited, expectant. She looked round; already Gallas was in his seat above her, between his vertical steering-wheels. His right hand rested on an odd thing, the commutator; his face was set in a calm expression of great contentment. "Are you ready?" he said, and to his watchful assistant:

"Contact!"

The motor, so close to her, broke out in a sudden roar. The man leaped away from it, from under the left wing. She had quivered, at the shock and the noise, but she recovered herself—the whole fragile framework thrilled and trembled like a living thing, all around her; the gigantic white wings at her shoulders shook with an impatient beat, over the dark ground.

"Your spectacles!" cried Udo. She had forgotten, in the glare and the blare, the shielded glasses he had handed her. Hastily she put them on. And at the same moment she felt the seat under her move—the whole big machine swept softly on, before and around her; so softly she would have believed herself already in the air, had she not seen the grey earth mantling at her feet. For a few moments the skiff skimmed along the surface; then, without shock or warning, it rose.

The ground fell away down under her; she saw it rushing back as if carried in a current. The white wings spread clear and calm, on the air. There was wind, then—far more than she had fancied in the heat of that summer morning, a steady breeze, carrying them on. The screw whizzed in the form of a transparent disk, little curls of blue smoke, little whiffs of oily smells passed swiftly by her. The smooth, roaring creature soared, soared. She was flying. In the silver sunshine and loud wind and shiny glitter of high heaven; the dull earth lay beneath her; she was flying through space.

Suddenly, some forty yards up, at a speed of, perhaps, a mile a minute, but of all this she knew nothing in her maze of boundless sky, boundless movement, suddenly she realised that, at the command of its rider, the great bird curved in wide space, swooped earthwards a few feet, swept aloft again, and bore on, till once more it sank, shooting ahead. The right wing flew up, the left down, at her shoulders, where she hung, behind the bellow as of a storm-wind; the loud seagull flapped on again, once more horizontal, it flashed forward in wide circlings and sweepings, and below, as she peeped through the frame-work, sailed the tiny-dotted, colour-speckled world. A mist of heat and motion closed around her. The noise stopped. The screw turned in rhythmical slowings, with a whistling sob of exhaustion, the monoplane sank through stately silence, towards the ascending earth.

Gallas had seen, from his perch, the people attracted by the whirr, running to the stretch of heath from which he started. He had reckoned on this, and, steering to the field behind the burgomaster's garden, he now suddenly dropped, letting the machine float as it fell. Without shock or jerk, as it had started, the Antoinette slipped along the ground and stood still.

The "monteur" came running up. Gallas assisted Eva out of the tangle. "Mind my wings!" he said. She stumbled; she could hardly stand. The crowd,

still in the vague distance, was hurrying towards them. With a swift resolve he caught her in his arms and carried her out of sight, through the grounds.

She lay against his shoulder, dizzy. Her heart throbbed like a stormy petrel on the wild waste of waters, with the stormy petrel's cry in the rush of the coming storm.

"Don't," she gasped. "I can walk!" She was not ill, not worn-out: her pulses were frenzied; her flesh felt a-flame. A new wine swelled her veins, a marvellous undreamed sensation; the uplifting from earth, the vast contact with heaven!

"Don't," she breathed again. He placed her on a couch. He stood, cap in hand, half-ashamed, wholly elated, by her side.

She put her left hand to her eyes, to her temples. "I'm all right," she said. "Only a bit dazed. It is —more than human, like the angels!"

"I ask but one reward," he said, and his lips trembled greatly. "I must go on almost at once. To-morrow I leave Holland for Brussels. Before I start again, will you give me a last cup of tea in the room where you only admit your quite intimate friends?"

She looked up at him with that strange light in her eyes still, that strange thrill in her voice. He stood before her in the manliness of his rough costume, his young achievement.

"Come!" she said.

CHAPTER XXXIII

THE motor-car rolled swiftly up the avenue of Sans-Souci in the dewy early morning. Nothing was awake as yet, except the staring flowers. The stable clock had not struck five.

Eva got out and rang the bell, thrice. The chauffeur sat scowling at the chronometer in front of him, doing a chauffeur's perpetual untruthful sums. A window opened overhead. Melissant, in pink pyjamas, stepped on to his balcony.

"How is Rutger?" said Eva. "Will you come and let me in?"

For answer he flung her his latchkey. She entered the parental dwelling alone.

Very soon her father joined her. "The door wasn't bolted?" he said, smiling. "I thought it wouldn't be. Well, what's the matter? Rutger's all right. He left last night."

"I know," she said. "I said that for Krelis. I had told him there was bad news of his master. We have travelled all night."

Melissant lit a cigarette and sank into the easiest chair of the morning-room, in his pyjamas, and waited.

"I have come," said Eva, standing at the other end, "to ask your advice—and your help, father, at the most terrible moment of my life."

"No," said Melissant. "The most terrible moment in your life is the moment of your death. Keep well: keep calm: and tell me all about it."

"I can tell you—you only, not mother. Mayn't I? It is true, is it not?—that you have—have sometimes had secrets from mother?" The questions alone sounded calm, not the voice in which she put them.

"Only those she didn't care to find out," answered Melissant.

"She has often hinted as much. That is why I dare to come to you. You were not always—faithful to her, father?"

"Eva, there are questions that nobody but a fool ever puts because nobody but a fool would give an answer."

"Now you are angry,"—her whole frame trembled: he saw it. "Oh, father, you must have patience with the fool, when the fool is your child!"

"Very well. What next?"

"So I've come to you. I know there's no comparing—you must help me, father—you must help me to find out, to understand, whether I should stay with Rutger."

"Stay with Rutger? You can't. Fortunately at this moment he's speeding towards Milan."

"Yes!" she drew a long breath. "That gives me time. He is away. I am here. I must understand, at once, whether——" she broke down, weeping: she sank into a chair, and covered her face with her hands—"I should wait for him to come back—or—should not."

"What is your alternative?" said Melissant very quickly. He threw away his cigarette: he sat up. She turned, with haggard eyes: and he thought how handsome she looked, and how girlish, in her long dark-blue coat of her own design.

"To go to Brussels."

Melissant's bright face went a chalk-white. "The whole doubt," he said sharply, "the whole discussion—the possibility of it in any other case but one, the extreme, is palpably and manifestly absurd."

They both paused: each could hear the other's breath.

"It is not absurd," she said.

"God!" said Melissant quite quickly. His gaze swept over the white room with its gay chintzes and roses. The sunlight was pouring into it already. He

rose and carefully closed the blinds. "Don't speak for a minute!" he said: and, indeed, she had no wish to speak, lying weeping.

"Well," he said at last, and the voice was the familiar one. "You're outside your Paradise, and not rid of your Adam—There's nothing unusual in that." He sat down, in another chair, farther away from her. "My dear child, above all things, we must now talk hard sense."

"I'll do anything you bid me," she said, drying her eyes. Her accent was so tender, so innocently seductive: he held up his hand.

"We love each other," he said, "And we are sorry: that goes without saying. Hard common sense."

He flung one pink leg over the other thigh and nursed it. "There must be no scandal of any kind," he said. "Absolutely none. That is my first word of advice, and pretty well my last. Look here—I suppose you may be certain of—the other's decency? Of course. And you're not madly in love with him—or, if you are, you don't mean it—and, besides, fever isn't consumption, though people often think so. And he doesn't live at Skilda. And, Eva, the thing's over, whatever it has been, or you shouldn't have come to me. And if it isn't over, your motor is at the door and—no, by Heaven you sha'n't enter it, until you've sworn to drive to Skilda!"

"You have answered me," she said trembling again. "I don't deny you are right."

From a drawer of the writing-table beside him he took a folded newspaper and flung it to her in a flutter across the room.

"Find the mark!" he said. "I had to advertise last week that I wouldn't pay the debts of my own son."

"Mom?"

"Yes, Mom. It isn't so very dreadful, but it certainly isn't pleasant. 'The young fool has been giving diamonds to a bar-maid. I shouldn't have minded that so much, had he the faintest conception of

money. I always say no man can go altogether wrong, who remembers that a guilder cuts up into exactly a hundred cents."

"No man," said Eva bitterly.

"No. There's no help for it: we must look at things as they are, Eva. The boy is quite ridiculous over it. Offended. Cuts me dead. At my own table. I don't object to my children causing me trouble. That's reasonable. But it needn't be more than they can help."

"Oh, father!"

"Remember Nina Loring. And learn from Celia van Rys. If you want to content me, do whatever you like, but remain Mevrouw Knoppe. Not only in name, of course, but in position."

"Yes," she said meekly, confused.

"You love Rutger, I am sure."

"No," she looked full at Melissant. "I do not love Rutger. Of that I am sure. I have had all the night in the car to think it out. I admire him and esteem him and wish him well—anything you like—but I do not love him."

"Well, that is plenty—more than most of us have to rub on with. You must endeavour——"

"And he does not love me. Yes, he loves me, father—let me speak; let me try to explain!—but he doesn't admire me, doesn't esteem me—not that he need do that, oh no!—how shall I make you understand?—he doesn't care, doesn't feel about what I feel, except, just to be kind, oh, very kind!—still he disapproves. Oh, he needn't have esteemed me—me—no, that's not the word—ah, no!—I don't know how to put it. If I had been like Margot Bigi, I suppose it would have been all right."

"Dear girl, try to calm yourself. Surely you were not jealous?"

"No, indeed!" she cried with vehemence. "No! No! Oh, father, don't let me wrong him, because I am a wicked girl!"

"You are not wicked," he said lightly, "but you are a girl. You are barely twenty-one. You have a whole life still before you. And you must go back to Skilda and make that life as happy as it ought to be. Nobody must know what I know. Not your mother, certainly; and of course never Rutger. Never, never, believe me, whatever happens. Not in life, not in death. And the other man mustn't know that I know. Remember all that. And, some day, when your hair is white, or, I hope, long before, you will smile, with just a faint blush, perhaps, to recall this early conversation of ours."

"Yes, father."

He drew a leather block-note towards him on the table: he splashed a blot of ink on it, in a purple smear from the quill.

"There!" he said. "You see that? Parsons'll tell you nothing will clean it. *That's true.* But you can tear it off,"—he did so, crumpling the little sheet—"and here's a fresh page to write on. K—Kiddie, I want you to listen. From to-day, mind you, your life mustn't be a memorandum, but a block-note."

She had come close to him. She gazed at him fondly and sadly. "You aren't sorry that I came to you?" she said.

"I am heartily glad. I shall even endeavour to forgive you the—consideration which caused you to select me."

"I may stay here, father, a little, may I not?—before I go back to Skilda. There is nothing to recall me to Skilda—not even for the future! Only a little grave."

"H'm! One of my gardeners was ill, and I sent him to the great man at Nieburg. The great man treated him for a broken leg——"

"I know, father."

"No, you have forgotten. It was typhoid. Well, you had better go to your old bedroom. I will tell your mother, whom nothing would wake, except an

earthquake, that Gallas has given you an absurd false alarm."

Left alone, he drew the ring—which he had always since the day of the anniversary called the ring of Polycrates—he drew that ring from his finger, and dropping it, ground it, slowly and laboriously, under his slipper heel, into a shapeless little lump. Then he flung it into a drain.

By the front-door loitered a sleepy servant.

"Mevrouw had heard that Mynheer Knoppe was dying," said Melissant. "It's a mistake for Baron Knoppe, who has had some sort of a seizure. But he isn't dying, I understand."

The chauffeur winked at the servant. "Well, it's a record," said the chauffeur. "Five hours and a half on a clear road. Had it been day-time, she'd have wanted to get out and see towns."

CHAPTER XXXIV

MEVROUW MELISSANT expressed unmixed satisfaction at Eva's arrival. "You are my favourite daughter," she laughed. "Oh, I don't pretend you are not!" Mevrouw Melissant believed herself incapable of pretending, yet she could pretend to feel well. Her stiff knee necessitated the use of a cane, and even of a bath-chair: about these she made innumerable small jokes which, stupid as they might sound in cold print, pathetically brightened her disease to her surroundings.

She seized upon the opportunity of exhibiting Eva at every show, party and entertainment that came within her reach. "Marthe will go to none of these," she said plaintively, "but that's because Marthe can't wear her clothes. I'm so glad you continue to care about your clothes, Eva, though you *are* happily married: I wish Marthe was." But here came a sudden rebuff: everybody told Mevrouw Melissant they thought Eva looking ill. "Very handsome, but very ill," said old Aansmeer to his daughter Bessie. "Now seest thou to what these love-marriages conduce!" Bessie nodded to her Greek, and, resplendent with jewels, said: "Yes. White doesn't suit *me*."

It suited Eva. She leaped into the midst of her mother's wheel of life, where the same skip is being skipped on all sides of you in seemingly endless rotation, by the same set of skippers, all the time. The young men crowded round her, because she was a married woman, and younger than they. She was pronounced such a success that Celia van Rys, already twenty-six, began, however good-natured, to look askance at her. "You shouldn't try. She doesn't try," advised old Mevrouw

Gallas, who was about as bad an old woman as they're made (by men). "She hits back the ball. You bombard them." Celia went off in as high dudgeon as she could attain to, her little brown face all over dimples and puckers. Meeting Fritz, who, at the age of nineteen, possessed to an amazing degree the good looks of the Melissants, she immediately bombarded him.

The sudden return to all these gay people she had grown up amongst was an immense relief to Eva. More so than the home circle at the house which no longer deserved its name. Marthe was either sullen or shrieky: Mom was silent. The head of the family had been called away, to buy horses in Ireland, an unexpected semi-official commission, which he very seriously undertook under a great semblance of "pooh-pooh." Fritz sang, as a boy sings before his beard is out, the clear praises of Rutger.

Rutger wrote that his wife's letters were mere statements of fact—like a shoddy Court Circular. He himself was full of work. But he would be glad to rest from all his travelling experiences at Skilda. Presently he announced his return and begged Eva to precede him.

"So I shall go back to-morrow," she said. "To Aunt Imka and Sherlock. That leaves him three days."

"But my dear Eva, the Lorings' party—did you know he had re-married? And Bessie Cheiropopoulos? Why not make him come here?"

"Because he won't," smiled Eva. "And he's the won't-est man in little things that ever was."

"It doesn't sound comfortable," sighed Mevrouw Melissant complacently. "Happiness consists of concessions: that is one of your father's wisest sayings, the wisdom in which is too deep by nine-tenths for my small brain to fathom. Are you going by motor or by train?"

"Oh, by train! by train!" cried Eva. "I shall never motor that way again."

"It *is* a long distance," assented Mevrouw Melissant.

"Eva, that morning-coat of yours is delicious. I notice your things so, because I think it is so clever and so good of you to triumph over *that* concession. To get one's clothes at Kykstad! It must be a martyrdom, and Rutger might well expect '*des fagots.*' There, that is quite in his own manner, isn't it? It's really very easy, but don't you sometimes find it rather trying, dear?"

"No," said Eva. "He is very methodical, you see: and I don't think he makes more than one pun a week. They are usually very good puns."

"That may be an excuse, but it isn't an alleviation," replied Mevrouw Melissant. "You are right to see only his good qualities. I started like that twenty-three years ago, and I find it answers. Well, we shall come and stay with you, I trust, in the autumn, for some shooting: and you must introduce me to your wonderful little dressmaker. Pannequet is, of course, 'hors concours,' but he can't make gowns for invalids."

"Don't use that word: you will dance at your silver-wedding."

"So I shall, even if it be a *pas de trois.* There again—it is positively catching! Eva, I can't understand how you remain entirely unmodified by Skilda. You are exactly as you were here, only more so and married. You are sure it is wise, dear, not to become in the slightest degree—how shall I say?—Skilda-esque?"

"I don't follow your meaning," said Eva with straining eyes.

"Try to think it out on your way back: I can't explain it. You see, our great prototype, even when she snatched the apple she wanted, was pretty sure of her husband's taste in fruit."

"They were the same! They were the same!" said Eva fervently, and blushing scarlet.

"Possibly," replied Mevrouw Melissant, shrugging her shoulders. "History doesn't tell. You may be right. Perhaps the woman never lived who for her

husband's sake would eat the fruit he didn't want Yet plenty of us would gladly be chopped to pieces."

When the elder Melissants began to moralise, the younger Melissants always withdrew to some material enjoyment. Eva therefore went and sat among the roses, and ate some pineapple strawberries, brought her by old Perk.

"Yes, I'm leaving to-morrow," she said. "Your son is doing well?"

"Call it well, if you like," said old Perk. "He's teaching the useless things he's learnt."

"Surely not all useless, Perk?"

"I've got on without them. All sorts of old things that are dead and done for. Psha, you might as well go round here digging up all the dead cats!" His eyes roved round his garden, with agreeable reminiscence of marauders slain. In nothing did he sympathise with his son, who, by very temperament, felt a student's weakness for puss. Old Perk was a shrewd man of business and manager. He slew cats, who would have devoured the birds, who ate his fruit. Nature has willed that we should all act thus, all day long.

"Piet's learning is wings," continued old Perk, who never yet had uttered the stupid nickname. "Like those I once read about in the paper that were made of wax. When you go high up—bang! I prefer ladders."

"Piet'll climb," said Eva, who never yet had used (like the others) the stupid nickname to old Perk. "Or he'll fly." She began to talk about flying-machines, glad, glad, glad to tell her experience, even to this most unappreciative, crabbed old creature, with great curves on his leathery skin.

"No, I shall never try it again!" she said. "Never, never, I promise you."

"Don't promise *me*," replied old Perk, mumbling. "'Tisn't my business, if you fall, Miss Eva. Promise your husband!"

These concluding sentences Eva would have preferred

to let slip from her memory, as she tried to doze in her home-bound train. But they were the very phrases which elected to shape themselves into jolting music, and the wheels banged Promise! Promise! till the guard said: Kykstad!

The motor was in waiting. It banged nothing, as it ran quite softly through the soft June night. But it hissed a continuous little whizzy murmur, like the softest human whistling, somewhere up above the glasses, as if countless lips in darkness were expressing their contempt. It is not easy to scorn foolish fancies, when those fancies stick. As the house came in sight, she hardly knew whether to feel glad or sorry. And so, being a Melissant, she elected to feel glad.

The entrance-hall, she thought, looked pleasant: the faithful servants had put flowers in it. She turned into the little side-passage. On the mat, under the lamp, by his master's closed door sat Sherlock.

"Better not go in, ma'm: he's in a strange mood," said the grey-haired serving-man. Not a specially ancient retainer, hired with dyed hair, about six years ago.

"But I?" said Eva haughtily, throwing back her head. Sherlock growled, as he rose. His eyes shone, in the shadows, like green amethysts. Probably he told himself, that she had never been more in his family than a guest or a governess, and that, having now been away for nearly a month, she had no right, in Rutger's absence, to return.

She did not argue the point with him. "I have no cause to go in. It is very late," she said, avoiding the old servitor's sarcastic gaze. She went straight to her bed. And at first she lay sleepless between the strange sheets, in her own house at Skilda. Then presently she slept, to dream that she was wandering through an immeasurable wilderness, stocked with Sherlocks on every hand.

Next day she saw most of the Skilda notables and had occasion to compare then with her Nieburg friends.

Aunt Imka sent for her and demanded unlimited Rutger. Eva supplied all she could, not half enough. Aunt Imka remarked that in her youth young men, if they travelled, wrote home letters, not scraps of six pages.

"He can tell it you all himself in a couple of days," said Eva.

"I might be dead before then," replied Aunt Imka resentfully, "at my age."

"Yes, that *would* be a pity!" said Eva.

And then, as she waited for his return, a great horror fell upon her and a great fear. She had striven to visit the little grave: she could not. She had risen, twice, in vain, to ascend to the upstairs chamber, and halted. She had sat for many hours in the ugly drawing-room. The last evening came of her solitude: the shadows fell in blue velvet. She rose, benumbed, with a great gasp, as of some hunted animal. She rang and bade them send for the car.

"This craving for midnight rambles must be checked," said the chauffeur. Or, as he put it: "If she tries this on again, I shall say my lanterns are out of order." But he knew that his master would never stand that.

"To Volda!" said Eva.

"What now?" Krelis, behind his wheel, grinned and chuckled, in the stillness and sweetness of the night. The Skilda steeple-clock struck eleven in their wake. The Catholic church would most certainly be closed.

The Protestant one was never open, except for the Sunday service. Nor would its square whitewash and faint memory of long droning have tempted her to enter.

"Chalk and talk," said Melissant, the only time he ever came out, after a discourse of an hour and twenty minutes. But a little old woman in a costume cap, trudging behind him, thought very differently. To her the eighty minutes of Old Testament research, in the sanctuary, on the Sabbath, had been as an advance of four miles on the heavenward road.

Eva knew nothing of a heavenward road. She had

never been taught to fear God, nor even Mrs. Grundy. She did her own sweet will—sweet it had been—with consideration for the feelings, but not for the opinions of others. She went to Volda at eleven, as she had left for Nieburg at eleven, because a bird flutters to escape.

In the motor, with the swift movement, her thoughts cleared. She realised that she had sat all this last day in the stifling room, with the blinds closed. Surely she had eaten something? Yes, towards evening, when she said her head was better, under the faithful servant's sarcastic gaze. At Sans-Souci, during this whole month, she had often felt as ill as she looked. It was not a strange thing to feel thus feeble, with the suffering and the shame of her nights.

When the clump of trees rose black against the dark-blue horizon, she suddenly understood she had made a fool of herself—she must do something. She spoke to the man, told him to turn on the little church square and drive back. The trip in the cool air had done her good. She might sleep.

In the empty grey space, shadowed by foliage, the machine creaked and twisted a little before it had entirely come round. And to meet it, as it slowly veered to its steerer, a well-known shapeless figure shambled out of the dark wall of the still building. Hermus, the sacristan, had been taking the air also, after the hot doze of the day. He came into the lamplight, all disjointed limbs and shakings: and he uttered his guttural notes: "Hoo-hoo-hoo."

Eva got out. If God sent the strange messenger, why not accept the message? "Yes," she said, "I should like to go in." He unlocked the beautifully-embossed old door and sank aside, with his rasping key, and his grating shuffle and his grunt. The whole church was dark except the single corner at the back by the little Lady Chapel. "I should never have dared to enter!" said Eva aloud. She knelt on the threshold.

Then, afraid lest Hermus might find her there, she

arose and crept along the oaken stalls and the stone pillars to the chancel, a prayerless penitent. And she fell upon her face before the calm Madonna, and lay dizzy with the dumb heat and the false shadows, the faint scent, and the sinking at her heart. She was ill. She dared not meet Rutger to-morrow. Life was useless, death worse.

Was this death? She passed, lying there, into a sudden oblivion, a grey smoothness, that was rest. She had never fainted before.

She awoke from what she knew to be no sleep with a single cry for pity: "God!" It was too loud a cry in that dimly-lighted silence. It rang out.

She started up. The full radiance of the little lamp lay golden on the inner glory of the Virgin Mother. The countenance that had so often unclosed, through slow centuries of sin, its compassion for human frailty and human sorrow, bent its gaze of unchangeable pity on this offspring of Eve.

"God!" said the young wife softly. She lifted high her clasped hands, against the carvings. She said nothing more: for the first time she prayed.

The mute, who had imagined her prone in supplication when she fainted, had pressed the hidden spring and slunk away.

She prayed. Without words, without sequence. Only in a yearning for a stronger, a better than herself. Her eyes were drawn up towards the eyes that shone down on her—wooden eyes, painted eyes—eyes in which the long dead artist had sunk his living spirit, eyes which the appeal of sad women, through the ages, had filled with such response as lies deeper than tears.

And she wept as she had not wept till then—not in pity only for herself, but—contrition. She wept silently, repressing her sobs, she rose silently, and stole away.

Near the Chapel of St. Nicholas she paused, catching her breath. She leant against its railing, confused by the same giddiness as before.

"Can I be of any assistance? Hermus came to tell me you were here," said the kindly, grave voice of Father Bredo. She told him that she had become unconscious, suddenly, in the small space at the back of the altar. And now again she was giddy: she had never felt thus before.

"Perhaps it is the Virgin Mother's response to your prayer," replied the Father calmly. In a voice full of quiet sympathy he added: "You must go home now, and to-morrow morning ask your doctor. I feel sure you are not seriously ill."

No; the hesitative doctor declared next morning he felt sure, despite the collapse of all his theories, that Mevrouw was not seriously ill. An hour later she received her bronzed husband, by the doctor's advice, at her own door, and not, as she had wished, at the station. And she hid her countenance deep down upon his shoulder, as she whispered of a possible blessing, perchance sent to make a whole life worth living, from the very heart of the purest mother who ever breathed.

CHAPTER XXXV

"I MISS Gallas," said Rutger. He stood with his wife in the pungent smell of the long brown shreds that filled one of his many endless tobacco barns.

Eva sneezed. As often as she sneezed in the snuffy draught of these latticed buildings he laughed: she did not think him considerate.

"Yes, I miss him: he was useful," continued Rutger, pausing in his fiftieth account of his travels. "And he was a link with his avaricious old father. A Hungarian magnate is a pleasanter financier than a Dutch banker. My uncle should have given the money—a Baron Knoppe!"

Eva was silent. She preferred a minimum of deceit.

"I know you did your best, but one's best's no good, if there isn't a chance to start with. My uncle's old-fashioned, thinks I oughtn't to have grown up. And he hates Aunt Imka, because she came to me, and because I left the army (very much against her will). It's an odd world, Eva. I suppose, as a matter of fact, you miss Gallas also. He was good company: and I don't know how the theatre club'll manage without him. Fortunately you will have other interests, dear child!"—he drew her towards him and kissed her, against his shoulder.

"Yes," she said. "It's an odd world: one wonders whether it's really good luck to be born into it?"

"What? Is that a daughter of Sans-Souci speaking? In any case we must go straight through it, and out by the right door."

He stopped in the passage to select the right-hand exit: and that she deemed provoking.

"True, Gallas was amusing," she said. "His great flight doesn't seem to have come off?"

"He keeps postponing it—more practice—improved machine. I heard from him the other day. He sent you his best regards."

"Ah!—he wrote?"

"It was a reply. I had asked for a business address in Paris. He shouldn't be in Paris so much. He's a sad dog, I fear. When he's made his fortune in flying, he must settle down."

"I know a girl at Nieburg," said Eva, "who would take him without the fortune. And give him hers."

"Of course," replied Rutger indifferently. "All women are like that. And a good thing for us men! If women loved us only for our virtues—whew!" He whistled so loud, that Sherlock, who had been prospecting on his own account, and whose sensitive nostrils loathed tobacco, came running to inquire what was wrong.

Eva left the two intimates together. Many weeks had elapsed since that night when, burning with every flame that can melt a human bosom, she had cried from hidden lips to the figure in the darkness of her doorway an entreaty never, never again to give her any sign whatsoever of life! He had promised, and he had gone away into the deepening silence. True child of her upbringing, she had heaped the summer roses on a grave in which she would not look for fear lest she find no dead thing there. How truly her father had said that a fever was not a chronic complaint! The people who live cure a fever. In the sanctuary of Volda, as if from the very hand of the Purissima, she had received her remedy. She accepted it in a sudden up-bubbling of joy. She was young again, it seemed to her; she was strong again. Her moments of despondency became as black spots we observe on the retina, when alone. Nor had she much time for solitude and melancholy. All through the summer her husband had filled the days with his new work and his young ambition. The tramway pro-

ject was taking shape. The election he coveted was in sight. Eva worked for her candidate, socially, paying calls with Aunt Imka, appearing everywhere, endeavouring to make herself liked. In the village she had understood what was expected of her and settled to it. The Baroness Bigi ordered-in several illustrious preachers and reformers from foreign parts and treated the neighbourhood to afternoon conversaziones. Eva attended most of these and, as was expected of her, sat quiet during the talking-to and chattered over the tea. She managed to tell nearly all the Bigis nearly every time that it was exceedingly interesting, and once, on the way back, in the motor-car she informed Rutger that she considered Margot Bigi was sweet.

Rutger lighted up at once. "You saw something of her, after that Saturday to Monday in June?"

"Yes—no—I met her a couple of days after you'd gone again, but—you see"—she stared at the well-known landscape—"I left for Sans-Souci at once."

"So you did. That was so sudden. I imagine you felt too lonely after I'd gone?"

"Rutger, I have a confession to make to you. The preacher-man said just now we all ought to confess."

"Our sins," he spoke quickly, "to God."

"I should like you to know," she said in a low voice. The motor jolted.

"Well?"

"That same morning Mynheer Gallas turned up. He had hoped to find you. He was in his flying machine."

"Well?"

"He took me for a short trip. We whizzed round a bit. I couldn't resist."

"I knew that," he said.

"What! You knew?" She had been certain from his manner, that no one had happened to mention Udo's passage through Skilda. Nor had there been any risk of recognition for the hooded figure between the rigging. In leaving, the aviator had taken a similar figure with him, one of his monteurs.

"You knew!" she repeated. He detected—he would have been quick to detect that—a touch of scorn.

"I knew. And I didn't like your not telling me. I waited. But, if you choose, Eva, to retain, and to enlarge, the one speck on the sun of my—admiration for you—I cannot help it."

"What is the speck?" she faltered.

"You must know. Your—reticence." He brushed a number of dust-atoms from the arm-rest beside him, with painful care.

"I am glad you have so much admiration left," she said. And the motor ran on and ran home before either found another word.

Rutger went straight to his own den. He pushed the dog Sherlock aside.

"Thank God she told me," he said, almost aloud, under his heavy moustache. "At last!" There was a choke in his muffled voice that might, but for pride, have altered to a sob. He rang the bell. The faithful servant appeared, the thin figure with the sarcastic stare.

"If I understood you aright the other day," said Rutger, forcing a laugh, "you will not remain in my service, unless I come into the title?"

"And the property—the *property*, Mynheer," explained the faithful servant, whose name was Lap. "As I grow older I find Skilda too dull."

"Then you will have to find another situation next quarter-day but one, Lap—let me see, that is nearly five months!" For such a period the Dutch householder is compelled by democratic penalties to retain even an untrustworthy menial in his home.

"I can neither dispose of my uncle's life nor of his property," continued Rutger. "All the same, the information you called in question *was* correct. He *had* a bad heart seizure about two months ago, and Mynheer Gallas flew here with the news that *I* was dying. That the Baron denies it is just like his pluck. He won't hear of any weakness: and a heart seizure need leave

no trace. You may go." The sarcastic servant retired, smiling down the long passage to his pantry as faithfully as before.

"*My* deceit!" said Rutger. He gazed at Sherlock. "It is well you can only find out acts," he said, nodding. "The man got up his whole objection so as to tell me the story!" He sat playing with the big paper-cutter Eva had given him—the ivory that bore the words "Semper Fidelis," the motto of the Barons Knoppe. And his eyes strayed to a large-sized picture, behind the blade, on his bureau, of the five remaining Melissants, in a group as Variety "Follies," all gaudery and grins. He took it up slowly and placed it on a side table. "The Silly Melissants," he said gently. "The silly, silly Melissants!" Then he sat for a long time, his square chin on his broad palm, against the bureau, thinking out the commencement of his married life. In much he was to blame: if he judged too harshly the bright unreasoning temperament he had plucked, like a flower, in a moment of fascination, from the gardens of Sans-Souci. After all, he knew the charm of those gardens: he had played tennis in them, when the nymphs were children, frolicking under the trees. As a young officer at Randik, before his uncle quarrelled with him, he had deemed Mevrouw Melissant the most entertaining married woman he had ever met.

"I've been awfully unjust," he said. And his thoughts turned to Margot Bigi's probable up-bringing in her well-aired and clean-brushed youth.

"Of course she's been dull here, dreadfully dull. Why, even Lap is dull. Old Lap. It's difficult for me to realise that, because I've got such heaps to do. A man proposes to a girl for her pretty face and pleasant presence. He doesn't stop to inquire how *she'll* take to her surroundings? That's her business, not his. Poor thing, how she must have enjoyed that wild break with Gallas. She'd have told me, hadn't she been afraid of me. George! She must be afraid of me! What a brute I must often have been, that she should be

afraid!" He opened his door, repeating: "What a brute I must——"

Eva leant against the bit of white-washed wall.

"I was coming to ask you," she said. "Sha'n't we have our walk? Oh, Rutger, you mustn't admire me too much! Not admire me at all! Not admire! Only love me a wee bit. If you can."

"I can't love you a wee bit," he said gallantly. "Only a lot. And as long as you look like that"—his glance slipped from her face to her feet—"I must admire."

"Oh, my clothes!" she blushed slightly. She led the way out, in the light-filled early evening. The faithful Lap, shambling, stopped his master's energetic step:

"There's a woman at the kitchen entrance wants to see Mynheer Burgomaster!"

"You know I can't see people."

"She's a boy with her. He's cut his finger off, They've brought it."

"Eva!" They went round together. A poor woman, black-shawled, stood shivering in the autumnal mildness, a small urchin, sick with crying and pain, leant against her knee.

"Well, Vrouw Blaf!" said Rutger. She responded at once in a loud whine, telling all her sudden tragedy, clinging to the child, complaining, comforting—from a piece of brown paper she produced the severed member. It had only happened just now. The little finger: the top joint was gone. They had come at once to Mynheer Burgomaster! He would pidjit it on again!

"I can't do that," said Rutger sadly. The silent child burst into a shrill bellow: the mother followed suit. Rutger drew them indoors. "Can you help me, Eva? We must bind this up better than they have done." She got him hot water, cloths, bandages. She turned white. He saw how upset she looked. He tried to send her away.

The woman Blaf departed, dissatisfied. The burgomaster could doubtless have done it, had he abandoned his walk in the gloaming. These rich people! but they wake up, sooner or later, in torment. "Does it hurt very much, child? Don't cry."

"The lady gave me nice sweets," said the boy.

"I shouldn't have asked you to help me," said Rutger regretfully. "It's made you quite ill."

"I ought to be ashamed of myself. I am. I've never been any use to anybody, Rutger."

He laughed. "You'll learn lots of things," he said, "over your baby. You needn't be mother to all Skilda! And we'll get beyond this sort of thing. As I work my way up!" There was a splendid tone of quiet confidence in this last sentence. He threw back his head as he walked.

Their steps had, half involuntarily, led them to the rustic cemetery. They passed along its railings in silence. All during that walk through the mellow September twilight they spake little. She was telling herself how fully she admired him. He was measuring his great duty of tenderness towards the girl he had carried off into the wild.

They turned homewards through the village. Mr. Speck, the pork-butcher—father of the tragedian—bowed low at his shop-door, as they went by. Mr. Speck had acquired the colour and contour of his calling, but he was a Dutch pork-butcher: his thoughts were of theological sophistries, even as he stuck his swine. Rutger saw in his crimson countenance that he was bursting to explain.

"You weren't at the meeting last night," said the butcher.

"No, Speck: I'd been told they were going to put me up."

"So they did, Mynheer Burgomaster. And I wish I could agree with the Protestant Clericals, but I don't."

"What's wrong with the Protestant Clericals, Speck?"

"Wrong, Mynheer Burgomaster?"—the pork-butcher dropped his loud voice again. He bent forward: "They stick to the Old Testament. They said you can't improve on Moses! Not improve on Moses? Why, Moses stopped short of pork!"

Rutger looked down the village street. Christian children were playing about in it. There wasn't a Jew in all Skilda and Volda. "A good thing too," says Mr. Speck.

"Nonsense," answered Rutger. "If Moses were to come back in our day, he'd eat pork. Wouldn't he, Eva?"

"No," said Eva. "I cannot imagine Moses eating pork."

"What a bad supporter you are! I sha'n't allow you to canvass for me. Mevrouw agrees with you, Speck; I sha'n't have her vote." He walked on. The portly Speck paddled behind him:

"I trust I sha'n't lose your custom, Mynheer Burgomaster, or that of the Freule Lexma?"

"No fear, Speck. Like all Protestant Clericals we shall continue to eat ham."

"It is the principle, as the Freule will understand. The Freule is a capital customer."

"Yes, I know. She tries to make her kitchen live on pig. And supposing she insists on taking her name off your books?"

Mr. Speck reflected, balancing his round form upon one fat leg.

"I could vote for you as an Independent," he suggested.

"The exact word," said Rutger. "You've hit on it." He strode along the street, nodding to the children. "Come, Eva! It's half-past six."

"You must let me go to Volda," pleaded Eva. "I think I could speak with Father Bredo."

"Certainly," answered Rutger. "There are more Independents there!"

He spoke again before they reached their door. "You

are happier here now-a-days than you used to be—are you not?"

"I am happy," she said. He felt satisfied: he did not doubt it had done her good to confess. A little thing, if you like. Rather a foolish thing. Still it does one good to confess.

CHAPTER XXXVI

THE Melissants were there. The shooting had begun. The bye-election took place in the middle of it. Mynheer Knoppe was elected to the States Provincial.

Melissant enjoyed the whole huge joke. He drove a waggon round all day while the motor ran east and west. The nonsense he rattled out delighted him, especially when the electors acquiesced. In the evening, as soon as the result had been announced, Melissant sat down to a late supper, hot and hoarse.

"A record!" he said. "The day of my life on which I have said a thousand foolish things, and thereby done one wise one."

Already the Volda musicians and the Skilda comedians were blaring and huzzaing against the darkened windows. The curtains had to be drawn back. There were candles indoors and torches outside. There were shouts and speeches in a buzz of village excitement, and drawing-room approval. The cheering crowd parted and closed to the constant tinkle of glasses, as trays with claret and beer and cigars went circulating in the ruddy flare.

The quiet house echoed to the pop of champagne corks. Mynheer Lap, running to and fro, shook his head, but his grin had lost its sarcasm. And the little group of local notables round Eva opened out, with enthusiastic faces, as congenial county magnates drove up to the door.

"Margot insisted on my coming," declared the Dowager, "although I said it was absurdly late and far. The dear child has done her best for you, Mynheer Knoppe. She bought a copy of the Protestant Clerical

'Program,' and she read the thousand odd pages through!"

There was an awkward silence. Nobody there had accomplished this astounding feat, and nobody really believed it feasible.

"The Freule Margot is here?" asked the hero of the hour, with triumphant face.

"No, she is nursing one of our maids through the measles. Marcella and Constantia came with me."

"The measles!" Rutger stepped before his wife as if to shield her. The whole circle fell away from the Bigi.

The Dowager swept round in her sturdy black silk. "The measles! Surely you good people are not afraid? *I* haven't brought them: and, besides, Government decreed that they weren't infectious, ten years ago."

"That was a Liberal Government," said somebody quickly. Everybody laughed, with much noise, and applauded Baron Duff.

"I am proud to see this day!" cried the Freule Imka: her brooch caught the candlelight.

"Ah!" said Mevrouw Dickert, nodding her no less hereditary feathers. "Now that's the advantage of living till it came!" She turned, caught as on a hook, by the sharp eye of the Bigi. "There's things we'd be sorry to have missed," she stammered in a flutter, "if we died before they occurred!" The Dowager stared, in cool disapproval. Mevrouw Dickert, however, was having a fine time. From sheer good-nature Melissant had started a flirtation, and Mevrouw Melissant had given her a quantity of gloves. "I ordered them before my hand swelled," said the smart lady. The Dominé's wife oscillated, daily, between debt and desire. She tripped away now—alas that she couldn't show her pretty feet in such a throng!—to find out what the fresh disturbance at the door might be.

Baron Bonk, newly arrived, was trying to push his way through. He held a pale-green paper aloft and he cried above the hubbub: "Mevrouw Knoppe! The first

telegram for Mevrouw Knoppe!" He reached Eva: his vociferative progress had made a sort of silence around them, an expectant outline of faces by a clearing. Eva and Rutger both came to the front.

"A telegram? At this time of night? Impossible!" said Rutger.

"I've come straight from Kykstad Station. It was lying there. The station-master asked me to take it on." Bonk handed the envelope to the mistress of the house. "Your first," he said, bowing, "I'm proud to be the bearer. To-morrow there will be heaps."

She dropped her glance carelessly to the printed contents. Both rooms had grown quiet, waiting, amused. She stood by her cosy corner. Outside surged the babble of the crowd.

"Hook to Harwich and back," she read. Her voice faltered. "Udo Gallas."

Rutger caught at the telegram. "Hook to Harwich and back! Udo Gallas!" To-day of all days? She knew that he had waited till to-day.

The whole assembly took up the cry, in a swift grasp of its wide meaning! The link with England assured! The line across and home again, drawn taut as in a loop! Within a given time, under all the conditions of the contest, the thing accomplished, the prize gained! Hook to Harwich and back!

Udo Gallas, whom they all had known here, at Skilda! Udo Gallas, at this moment the greatest name in Holland! A name telegraphed in circles round the whole revolving planet—shouted at this moment, in the streets of Sydney and San Francisco! The German Ocean belted. Hook to Harwich and back!

Rutger, amongst the tumult of voices, threaded his way to a window. The massed faces hushed, under the torchlight, awaiting a speech.

"Mynheer Gallas—you all know Mynheer Gallas!—has flown across to England and back again!" There was a mystified silence. "He has gained the great prize of four thousand pounds!" A roar went up that

seemed to shake the windows. The next moment, outside and inside, cheer followed cheer. Rutger proposed the health of the victor. The music dashed, with a sudden blast, right into the midst of the shouting, the rin-kink of the glasses, the laughter and clapping of hands.

"Udo Gallas! Udo Gallas!" said Eva, with all the others. She held up her glass, again and again. She talked of nothing else, with all the others, till the last had gone, and she was alone.

"I'm dead-tired," said Rutger. She waited a few moments to see the house closed.

At the back-door stood the chauffeur, the man who drove so well, whom she had always disliked. She had blamed herself for the feeling. Rutger was right: you kept efficient servants and dismissed inefficient ones: you didn't like or dislike them.

"It's time to go to bed, Krelis," she said, rather sharply. The man was making a noise. He had driven and drunk all day.

"Is it, Mevrouwtje?" he hiccoughed: and the amazing diminutive, "little lady," tumbled her backwards, as if he had struck at her face. "I don't want to go home. My wife's there."

She turned away as quickly as possible, resolving to say something to Rutger in the morning, but the chauffeur noticed that she had noticed too much.

"So both gentlemen have been successful," he added in a drunken rush. "Mynheer's great, but the other's much greater. Much greater. We shouldn't mind that."

She tried to escape: he called after her, so loud, she deemed it wiser to stay.

"We sha'n't run away to him to-night—shall we?—as we ran away from him that other night, three months ago?"

She came close to him, her face white. "You have a wife and a baby," she said. "Think of them. Go home at once and don't open your lips till the morning. Then say what you want to say."

He scowled at her, abashed. "I know what I know," he stuttered, slouching off. "So does Lap."

"Goodnight, Lap," said Eva. She went straight upstairs. Rutger already slept. She stood gazing at his steady breathing. She slipped to her knees.

The servants! That was a horror, a pool of sludge that had not even occurred to her. Suddenly she found herself slithering on the edge of a slough. The slime of it already lay in a moist stain upon her heart. To damp down into it, shivering and sicklying, through the years. She shook, where she knelt, with a quiver that ran on through all her muscles. She could not steady herself, nor could she understand why not. She could only feel the loathing and the stigma, a nausea of the soul.

She repeated, as she knelt by her sleeping husband, prayers to various saints for help in time of trouble such as Father Bredo had taught her to pray.

CHAPTER XXXVII

"I WANT to speak to you, father. To speak at once. About things I didn't expect to mention again. You must listen!"

"My dear one, of course. Why so nervous? Shall we go up to your room?"

"Oh, not to my room. I haven't been in it since——"

"Quite so. It's your winter room? You might begin now. With me. Your mother was saying——" Melissant admired his (admirable) nails.

"What did mother say?"

"My dear Eva! She had understood from Rutger that you intended to make it into the nursery."

"Oh, not into the nursery—no—no!"

"Personally I think it would be a most excellent idea! Let me advise you. And now—supposing we sit down on that seat and contemplate the passing cow!"

Eva seated herself close beside him.

"Happy cow!" sighed Melissant, watching intently.

"The servants know," said Eva.

"They always do," said Melissant. "Is that all? We must take measures accordingly. One always has to. It's a nuisance. Tell me all."

She told him. Melissant smoked.

"Why, dear one, what a storm in a tea-cup! You worry your life out, and just when you ought to keep most cheerful. Who taught you to worry?"

"No one. Sometimes I wish they had. I've begun too late."

"Don't be unkind to your poor old parent. Let us see! The chauffeur apologised next morning. That's

all right. He's afraid of your husband. Lap's the real danger. He's leaving. They're not dangerous till they've left!"

"Or—or—the man is devoted to my husband!" said Eva, changing colour, in bars of white and red.

"Not devoted, dear! He dyed his hair before he came here. Devotion begins earlier. And devotion precludes delation, I should say." This sentence pleased him: he softly repeated it.

"I shall have to engage the man myself," complained Melissant, following with wistful eyes the far vision of the cow. "There's no help for it. And pay him well."

"Father, you can't have him about you."

"Why not? I don't mind a bit. They don't know: they suspect. So we keep them in the family. And you must be considerate—no more!—to your chauffeur."

He rose, stretched himself. "By-the-bye," he said, "all this fuss about Gallas is disconcerting. It can't be helped. Who'd have thought it? Unknown a week ago, and to-day the best known man in the country! The most famous Dutchman living! His portrait's in all the papers, all the windows! He's everywhere!"

"I know," she said, looking down.

"You'd forgotten him, of course. Well, Kiddie, you must try not to remember him now."

"Why did he wait till that day?" she answered. Her father gave no explanation: she glanced up.

"Because he loves me still," she said.

"No!" exclaimed Melissant violently. "Because he doesn't love you, because he mocks at you, plays with you! If he'd loved you, he wouldn't have thought of his glory but your peace. He doesn't love you. Trust one who has flirted all his life."

Two quiet tears stole from under Eva's sunk lids.

"Nor do you love him," said Melissant, all the violence gone. "If you think so, you are mistaken. Don't sit any longer! October's chilly. Did you think it was hot?"

She sprang to her feet. "Father, I must tell him! I can't stand the strain!"

Melissant walked on a few steps, before he answered. "Very well. But remember two things. First that he will never forgive you. No man could. Those who say they would, wouldn't. And those who say they do, didn't."

"I understand," she said. "I have thought of that."

"And secondly that your child will never forgive you."

She walked on, more steps than he had taken before replying, far more. Then she said: "I must dree my weird."

"The expression is extreme. The house is ugly, but not as ugly as all that! The life is dull, but it is going to be less so. You can keep your cook, and when you are the Baroness Knoppe, you will find your weird benign."

"I suppose so," she assented, suddenly comprehending how she had got thus far.

"And there is one thing, Eva, you must really still allow me to mention, as we are talking about your nearest relations. I've preferred not to allude to it before." Melissant stopped by the gate, speaking low, and decisively. "You can do as you think best, of course: I should never dream of biassing you, but—if there were ever to be any little public unpleasantness—I am very fond of you—but—you can't expect us to abandon our social position—if people declined to meet you—well, what could we do?" He gazed at her pathetically, and repeated: "What could we do?"

"Drop me," said Eva. Melissant felt that his children understood the education he had given them.

"What would you have?" he said, opening the gate with due courtesy. "There are the others. And your mother. And myself."

He found his wife in the room they shared at Skilda. "I have a headache," he said. "I should like to lie down in the dark."

"Nonsense, Lourens. What are you driving at? Has Aunt Imka come to call?"

"I love Aunt Imka. Please send me up some tea by—what's his name—Lap."

After much protest and laughter Mevrouw Melissant incredulously stumbled downstairs. When the faithful servant arrived, he found the chamber curtained. He knocked against some furniture and clattered the tea-tray down with a splash.

"One can see you are accustomed to invalids," spake the faint voice of the sufferer. "It's a valuable quality. Were you with an invalid in your former situation?"

"I've often been with invalids," lied the faithful one.

"Just so. I'm not an invalid, but when I have these headaches, I like a quiet hand."

Lap lifted his nostrils. "Your servant suits?" he said.

"I haven't a personal servant, Lap. As I grow older, I feel I should look for one. If you knew of a man who was quiet, like you?"

"I've given notice here: didn't you know?" said the faithful one, rattling a spoon off the tray.

"Have you? Why?"

"I want to go to Nieburg. We're dull here. Shall I close that chink?"

"Do! Well, a valet should be quiet in two senses; noiseless and—discreet."

"I'm discreet," said the shambling Lap. "Why shouldn't I? There's no earthly good in talking to the wind."

"Just so. Well, we must speak of it again, when I haven't a headache. The situation at Sans-Souci is accredited a good one."

"The best in the neighbourhood," answered the faithful one, and banged, for, in spite of his sneer, he was purblind, against the door. All the way downstairs he grinned: with each stair-step the grin grew more sarcastic.

"Well, I shall have to sport a headache occasionally," sighed Melissant. "And I don't even care, as my father did, for wine!"

When the shooting was over he carried the faithful one away with him, between terms. Mevrouw Melissant said she would have wondered, had she troubled to understand. "You may take anything you like," said Rutger.

"Even the cook?" demanded Lourens.

"Even the cook—eh, wife?"

"Even Sherlock," said Eva.

"No, not Sherlock. It is Eva's one fault that she doesn't love Sherlock."

"Is it Sherlock's chief virtue that he doesn't love me?"

"He is jealous," said Melissant hastily. "It is a fine gift in a brute or a man. Only not in a woman."

"You have made that remark before," objected Mevrouw Melissant. "You are too fond of making it in the presence of your wife."

Rutger stared at his plate. He thought of people who danced in flames without their hurting them.

A few days later, when "the Children" had left, he reverted to this moment. He found Eva in her corner, a pictorial at her feet.

"Gallas!" he said, picking it up. "Nothing but Gallas! They can't stop talking about him. What he eats, drinks and wears."

"Yes," she answered. "The Dowager calls it Mammon-worship: I don't know why."

"Oh, that's the enormous four thousand pounds. What's that in the fire, Eva? A book?"

"Is it? So it is. Yes, a book, Rutger."

"But why——what made you——?"

"Rutger, I wish you'd come in ten minutes later. It's a book that I burnt."

"You make me inquisitive," he said frankly. "Has the Dowager sent you a book against the Pope?"

"No: please don't worry. It wasn't a nice book."

"I bet it's one of those your father lent Mevrouw Dickert!"

She coloured, stream upon stream of crimson. She thought him tactless at that moment: she thought him cruel.

"You're too good!" he cried angrily. "Too sweet altogether! Too pure and too harmless! How can they let you even see it! I won't have it. It's too bad!"

"Hush, Rutger. Oh no, I'm not as good as you say!"

He kicked at the embers. He was in a white rage, quite unusual. "I won't have it. You mustn't burn them! You mustn't touch them!" he cried.

"I send them back for her. Don't, Rutger! You hurt me!"

He stood in front of her. "You are pure," he repeated, "as a woman ought to be. And you came away, out of—Nieburg, and married me."

She cowered in her corner, her hand before her eyes. "I tell you, you hurt me! I married you because you were the pious Knoppe!"

"I was not the pious Knoppe. You heard your father. A man isn't. A woman is."

"I married you: I loved you, because you were so much that one ought to be, and I wasn't. Because you worked, and loved duty, not only nonsense and play! Because you'd even left the army, when you found it was only make-believe! Because, you see, you were all that, and I wasn't! Oh, Rutger, you mustn't praise me—I can bear anything but that!"

She was too much moved: he strove to spare her more emotion. "So you asked me to the Dull Party!" he laughed.

"Yes," she laughed back, recovering her self-restraint, "and you were the only not-dull person there!"

And the tragedy of her regret slipped back into calmer currents. The winter sped on toward the great sunrise, awakening in clear hone on the horizon. The

usual incidents of village-life repeated themselves. Victor Hugo came at Christmas and made a success of the play-acting: Mevrouw Dickert grumblingly relinquished her last hold of the library: the Freule Imka tatted whole counterpanes, sold to unwilling friends, for the unknown poor. With the first rainbow-glories of the hyacinths the great promise fulfilled itself for Eva. Her daughter was born, a sure guerdon that the tempest had sunk to rest.

"Peace to the peaceful," said Father Bredo, standing beside the cot. For the nurse had just told him that *this* babe never cried.

Eva beckoned him to her couch.

"Some day soon I shall ask you for peace—can you give it me?" she said.

"If we confess our sins, He is faithful—" replied the Father, and checked himself.

"Confess," said Eva faintly. "Confess!"

"To God—not to man, my daughter. Not to man—who can never forgive."

"Nurse, bring me the baby," said Eva.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

SHE was not yet twenty-two: they had been married two years and a half.

"I quite agree with you," said Mevrouw Melissant to her grand-daughter. "It was high time you arrived."

There had been some slight difficulty about the infant's name. "My mother's was Imka," said Rutger, who desired to please the grand-aunt.

"But you don't really remember your mother," said Eva.

"Don't call her after me, whatever you do," put in Mevrouw Melissant hastily. "I refuse to be a responsible godmother to anybody."

"I should like her to be Mary, please!" decided Eva. "I don't mind about future boys, Rutger, but I should like this child to be Mary."

"Oh, Mary, by all means," acquiesced her husband ungraciously. "But the future Baron Knoppe will be Rutger, mind!"

The present Baron Knoppe wrote very rudely about Mary: Eva smiled her own little smile over the letter: the money for the mug was by no means to be spent on a girl.

"But there must be girls!" exclaimed the grandmother. "What? Not in the Knoppe family, except by marriage? You poor little thing!" Mevrouw Melissant embraced the contemplative baby and fell to laughing over a Sans-Souci grandmotherdom for the fiftieth time that week. She knew nothing of nursing requirements, but she had brought a most excellent nurse with her, and Aunt Imka fortunately clung to some queer saw of her own childhood about its not really mattering whether you stood an infant right side

up or the reverse. "Infant mortality?" said Aunt Imka. "There wasn't anything of that kind in my day in Friesland. Or, if there was, it didn't hinder most people growing up!"

Mevrouw Melissant shrugged her shapely shoulders. "Eva, did I tell you that Nina Loring had married her officer at last? Heavens, what formalities! But Cissie has managed very well, I hear: and now they live at Montreux."

Rutger glanced up from his pile of documents with almost a scowl.

"Rutger doesn't approve of his cousin Nina," said Eva.

"Approve?—no, indeed: how could I? Do *you* approve of women who run away from their husbands?"

"More after they run away than before," said Mevrouw Melissant.

"Don't, mamma! Rutger doesn't like it."

"Well, she hasn't the children, and she lives at Montreux," persisted Mevrouw Melissant. "Surely her atonement may be reckoned sufficient."

"'Cousin' is hardly correct," put in Freule Lexma. "Her mother's father—but you people don't care about that. In my youth—but you don't care about *that.* I will tell you an amusing story about old Jasper Loring—Rutger needn't listen. Jasper was a dreadful old reprobate——"

Mevrouw Melissant fixed her face in dead lines of sympathetic interest: she disliked broad stories about the dead as much as she avoided any living scandal that didn't take a kindly turn. "All that seems to me," she was wont to say, "like hurting people's feelings without their knowing it!" She had a valuable gift of laughing without listening—of making, at hap-hazard, some coveted reply. Even the birth of this baby could not enable her to enjoy a fortnight at Skilda. She talked to Eva, in all available corners, of her circle at Sans-Souci.

"Since Charlie died," she said, meaning the regal lap-dog, "I have been trying to find someone really worth petting. Marthe won't stand a kind word! She says they disagree with her, like honey! She's been quite a nuisance. If I *could* trouble about a self-willed anybody—but I'm not such a fool!—I should have spoilt my nights over Marthe."

"What's she been doing?" asked Eva, rather listlessly. The subject palls.

"Refusing a man we should have liked her to marry, after flirting with him all through the season: could a daughter do worse? I'm not sure you know him. Inbreng, Mynheer Aansmeer's partner—he's not a young man."

"Oh, not an old one!" cried Eva eagerly.

"Close on forty. And very rich. Not a desirable connection, I admit; but he launched three coffee companies last winter, and made seventy thousand, they say. After the third he proposed, and then what do you think the idiot girl went and did? Oh, I know it's your father's fault for saying things you repeat. Inbreng offered her a share in his—I don't know what—home or hearth,—and she answered him right away: 'Are you sure you don't mean a bond?' Oh, you needn't laugh! Anybody could laugh!"

"Well, she can't have cared for him," urged Eva.

"Care or not, *I* prefer people to be considerate. And she mimicked his voice: you know how well she does that. He *has* a lisp. I can hear her saying 'b-th-ond.' But I don't appreciate that kind of wit, as you know. I like loving-kindness and good settlements. However, children can be ended but not bended, as your father always says. And I certainly sha'n't spoil my life for any naughtiness of Marthe's."

"Isn't it 'tended,' but not 'mended'?"

"Is it? Don't be accurate: it's a fault in our sex. No, Eva: you have always been my favourite; I warn you: you can have my diamond necklace to-morrow, if you like, but I shall never make you a present of my

social position. Well, I am going to drive with the Freule. Mind you never give her cause to tell wicked tales about you twenty years hence!" Mevrouw Melissant departed, laughing merrily, as she dragged her stiff knee up the steep flight of stairs.

She left Eva reflecting on a mother's unconscious influence in matters matrimonial, and especially on the little conversation about sticking to one's Adam in the pink and white child-room at Sans-Souci.

A practical result of the Inbreng esclandre—for the young lady had trumpeted her repartee all over Nieburg—was the banishment of Marthe Melissant to Skilda, whither she accompanied her brother Fritz, when the latter arrived in spring to assume the coveted situation of henchman to his hero. "You are sure you don't prefer the university? I enjoyed the university," said Melissant.

"But you didn't learn anything there! You didn't even take a degree!" cried the son with some heat.

"That's why I enjoyed it," replied the smiling father. "However, amuse yourself, if you can, with village statistics."

"I shall learn practical work from Rutger. That's what I want. And I shall start a village football club."

"Exactly. Kicking a ball where other people don't want you to kick it. I really believe"—Melissant yawned—"that is now-a-days your chief object in life."

"Well, it's good sport. And fame. I've been in two illustrated papers already. Almost as good as Gallas."

"Don't exaggerate. Gallas is in every weekly I open. I get so tired of his face. I shall have to restrict myself to the non-illustrated dailies. I who never read the letterpress. It's a dilemma." Melissant sighed. "My wine-merchant writes that he can't get me any more of that '68 brandy."

"You let Mom drink too much of it," cried Fritz. "You should speak to him about it."

"My dear boy, how can I speak to him, when he won't speak to me? I must keep up my dignity as a father. Well, well, you two must go and cheer up Eva. And as soon as you're gone, I'm off to Paris with your mother: there's a roaring thing on at the 'Variétés' that we're both simply dying to see."

"Paris? I wonder whether you'll come across Gallas? Young Aansmeer told me that he's having a perfectly lurid time there, on his four thousand pounds. But he won't be good for much more flying at that rate."

"Is he?—that will interest the good people at Skilda: they have not forgotten Gallas."

"I'll ask Aansmeer all he knows, then," said good-natured Fritz. And he broached the subject at dinner, on an early occasion, full of his freshly acquired information, to the reticent Knoppes.

"That's a good photo in last week's *Sporting Life*," he said, "but he probably doesn't look so healthy now-a-days."

"Gallas? He never looked healthy," said Rutger. "He was always a mealy-faced man."

"He was brown-burnt, like the Eastern," said Marthe, the ill-mannered schoolgirl. "I hate red-burnt men!"

"Thanks," said Rutger, and laughed till she was sorry she'd spoke.

"Gallas? I always said he was a 'vaurien,'" remarked Aunt Imka. "And I never yet made a mistake about *that*."

Eva raised her eyes off her plate. "He was kind-hearted," she said. "This is the first asparagus of the season, Rutger."

"In my youth," said Aunt Imka, "the asparagus—I mean the young men—were a great deal faster than they are now-a-days."

"Ho! you judge by Rutger!" shouted Fritz. His brother-in-law stopped him. But late that evening, when Fritz was fast asleep in the rooms Gallas had

once rented, Rutger started moralising, regretfully, over the aviator's extravagances, till Eva almost prayed to her confused galaxy of saints that he might stop. If he meant no special allusion, then why need he do it? And if he did mean anything——

He didn't often speak of this man who had conquered and held the attention of an entire nation. During the first weeks of enthusiasm she had often been on the point of asking why he avoided the subject. Now, when he talked thus, she bit her bleeding lips, lest the question escape from them—what he knew—what he feared? She would have flung herself into the abyss, for rest.

But, sooner than she had expected, his answer came.

"Yes, go to Volda," he had said of late. "You are a favourite there. You can help me. Go to those nuns at Rexlo. Admire their place! They hold a lot of land—far too much—and their peasants flock to the poll like geese. They're in my parliamentary division. I shall want their votes."

Eva obeyed with alacrity. But the road to Rexlo was an abnormally bad one, and the chauffeur, whose only good quality seemed his love for his machine, rebelled. Her dread of this man, in whom her husband only saw an excellent and economical motorist, had been the chief of all lesser torments during the long-drawn anxiety of that careworn winter. It was not that any positive act disturbed the silence between them. But she knew that she could not look naturally at him, and that he looked at her.

And that grey afternoon in the slush and spatter, he struck. Rutger had gone to the village, with Fritz, for his customary hours of office work. The coast was clear.

"Not to Rexlo!" said the chauffeur, sullen as ever, "the road isn't fit."

He had said similar things before, and she had, unwisely, perhaps, but tremblingly, acquiesced. Now

she insisted with a nervous eagerness he would observe. "But I must go. I am expected. I simply must."

"Last time we went she got a scratch on her back that long," said the man. "And a puncture the time before. No, I won't." He looked away to the thick shimmer, wide-spread.

A sudden resolve to fight him awoke in Eva, as if she had not been the child of her easy-going parents, some far call of ancestral blood.

"You will," she said. "Or you will never drive my motor again."

Such an evil expression came into his square face that she recoiled from it. But she gazed, for a brief moment, back into his black eyes.

"Your motor!" he stuttered. "My—my motor. Not drive my motor again?"—the thought seemed, as he slowly worked it out, to stir his sluggish mind into a frenzy. "Not drive my motor?" he shouted—standing there in the entrance-hall. She would have striven to hush him—in that one frantic moment: her pride kept her back.

"Because I won't spoil her," he shouted, "to please Mevrouw Gallas!"

Eva had heard the door open behind her: she recognised the tread round the twelve feet of passage. The chauffeur was lying at the bottom of the steps, in the mire.

Rutger closed the front door on the man's curses and threats. "I came back for some papers," he said in the hush of his fury. "How the fool screamed!"

"Oh, Rutger, did you hear what he said?"

"No, not rightly"—but she knew he had heard—"Some drunken nonsense. I have often fancied of late that he drank. I will drive you to Rexlo myself."

He did so, in spite of her protest, after an interview with the chauffeur to which he never alluded again. She sat behind him, in the landaulette, trembling and tearless. She had learnt to tremble now!

On the way back he took her to Volda and left her there, at her eager request, whilst he drove on, for half an hour, to his tobacco fields. She found Father Bredo in the church, playing Bach. For, the Father, an indifferent pastor, spent nearly all day in the sacred edifice, praying in it (not more than duty compelled), playing in it and playing with it. The last, and longest, occupation was his favourite. He could usually be found with Jiel Hermus beside him, dusting, polishing and rearranging his treasures. He now came down willingly from the organ loft.

To his, well-hidden, amazement, she threw herself at his feet.

"I want help!" she sobbed. "I want advice! Not as the world gives it. I want someone to tell me what is right!"

"But the ministers of your own religion——" he began, trying to raise her.

"I want no man," she exclaimed, "I want God! Oh, I suppose I'm a Protestant. I was christened so. I don't know about religions. But they're men, like others—the ministers. You're not a man: you said so—as priest! I want to forget you as Father Bredo! Only to see the representative of God—the Church!"

"That can you do, God helping you," said Father Bredo.

"I must confess my sin!" she cried, battling with her weeping. "I must obtain pardon for it. I must learn what to do—what is right!"

"The sacraments of the Church are for her children only," said the Father.

"But you must listen to me! Forget that I am a heretic! See only in me a most miserable woman! A guilty wife."

The Father glanced round. Then he stood motionless, a tower of strength, in the sun-lightened, mystic building. It seemed as if all the wooden saints were listening, many with uplifted hands.

She hurried on, in disjointed sentences, speaking

briefly of her brusquely disillusioned youth, and the vain illusion that a fire might re-illume it, of the bleakness now and the daily shame, in her husband's unchanging trust. She said little in her own disparagement or defence, much in his praise. And she leant against the chiselled carving, with a great weight off her breast, and a great yearning in her eyes.

"You are not a Catholic," said Father Bredo. "I can give you neither penance nor absolution. But I can give you the comfort of a priest."

"The advice of a Father in God," she said. The words lashed her memory as she uttered them: she crushed down the cruel thought.

"So be it. You ask what is right. It is right that you should sorrow. And keep silence."

"Are you sure? Oh, it seems to me I should confess—should throw myself on his mercy—no, I know he could not pardon—should go out into the waste!"

The Father smiled inwardly. Indeed this was not one of his village-penitents. The Dutch Catholic is sure his priest is sure, whatever that priest may say.

"Listen!" he said with such authority that she bent her head and her soul. "You have wronged him by the act, would you now wrong him by the exposure? What right have you, for your facile ease of conscience, to break up his home? He loves you. And he loves his child."

"His child!" she shrieked.

"In God's name, hush! By the Blessed Mother watching yonder, accept the answer that she gave you, and the boon. Ask no further questions, where no mortal can reply. Rest in God's will and His mercy. To yourself, henceforth, you owe only repentance—to your husband and your child you owe whatever happiness you can bestow."

She roused herself, for he now kept silence. She raised herself, and put back her hair. "I will do as you say. You must help me. Give me some punishment!"

'I?" said the priest. 'I will pray for strength in

your punishment. That it become not greater than you can bear!"

She went out quickly, unable to speak. The motor was already waiting under the chestnuts. The priest followed, impatient of subterfuge.

"Got a new doll, Father?" laughed Rutger. "She told me about it. She cares almost as much as you do. Only mind you don't convert her; you know these conversions do harm to your cause!"

"*I* shall not convert," replied the priest. "And if God converts, He must look after His cause."

These words left Rutger vaguely uncomfortable, but he had long felt incapable to cope with his wife's inner life.

Having driven the motor into the garage and partly cleaned it, he resolved on a great effort.

"It's no use, Eva," he said. "I *did* hear what the brute said. I can't and won't keep up shams. The other fellow started it. The man your father's got, and likes." Oh, Melissant!

"What?" she cried, terrified—"Lap? As long ago as that?" Suddenly she saw that the gulf she had so long dreaded had been there all the time, yawning wide.

"My dear child!" Rutger drew himself up to his full height, with all the old military bearing. "You surely do not think that our happiness is in the hands of the servants' hall?"

"No," she stammered. "No. Still, to feel that the servants——"

"The servants speak evil till one hears them, and then one sends them away. But there is just this. I am so much older than you: you must let me say it. There are appearances we do better to avoid. That—harmless—escapade was a mistake."

She looked long at him. And it seemed to her distraught imagination as if a vision of the Father shaped behind him, finger on lip.

"It was wrong of me," she said. "I am very, very sorry. I have often wanted to say how sorry I was.

His entire manner changed. He grew soft as a child that caresses. "Dear one," he said. "When anyone says he is sorry, everything is immediately forgiven and forgotten. Never let us speak of it again." He kissed her, with kind and considerate kisses. "Let's have the baby in," he said. "All the same I'm glad the chauffeur didn't say he was sorry. Yes, let's have Mary in to tea. Eva, I should like to have tea in your room."

"My room! It hasn't been entered since last summer!"

"I know. I have always understood that something disagreeable happened there—Gallas forgot himself! I forgive him. And you must. Let's have tea there together to-day!"

He held her. He drew her up the stairs: she could not resist him. Together they entered the dead chamber, that woke to life, under its dust.

Rutger gazed round him, almost amused. Like the practical man he was, he let in air, blew and flapped. "Sit down yonder," he added, "on your old couch." "I am better," she answered, "here in the shade." The westering sun flooded the grim chamber, lighting up its hundred mementoes of home-life and home-friends, its little art treasures and photos. In a vase or two hung dead roses. These Rutger flung out: he rang the bell.

"Send the child here and bring tea," he said to the astonished booby who now blundered, in livery, through a daily breakage, as "man."

Not half an hour later, while the happy parents were still playing with the infant, the same booby burst in Margot Bigi upon them, and closed the door. Such was his terrible conception of his duty as a social go-between.

"I—I beg your pardon. I wanted to call," gasped Margot Bigi, out of breath with the rapid climb. She had often wanted to call of late, and always satisfied her craving: she had been the greatest help to Eva through the winter in organising all sorts of things that the

burgomaster's wife would have missed and the Dominé's wife would have muddled in Skilda. "Eva Knoppe means well, and Mevrouw Dickert means nothing," said Margot Bigi very gently, at home.

The Freule Margot glanced nervously round the strange apartment. Many of the art gifts were scantily attired, and several of the photographs were foolish.

"I had hoped to find your sister," said Margot, who cherished the numerous marks of Marthe's nails in a mildly bleeding heart.

"She is out," smiled Eva, self-possessed at once. "Don't you think this a nice room? We don't use it in winter. It's my own."

"It is beautiful," said the flustered Freule. "Are these your friends? How nice to have so many friends."

"Yes, and such famous ones! Some of these things are by great artists, that came to my father's!"

"How delightful! I know nothing of art. Though of course we all paint, as you are aware. But mamma says that artists—however, Mynheer Knoppe knows about everything, does he not?"

"No indeed," said Rutger heartily. "I know that I don't know: that's enough. How good of you to come through this miserable weather. Is it about the sewing? I thought so. Now, please stop as long as ever you can."

CHAPTER XXXIX

THE summer evenings lengthened and shortened. Marthe amused herself at Skilda, nobody quite understood how: Fritz laboured there, nobody quite understood why. But the village football team "K.T.C.K." won a match against Nieburg, and two Kykstad shop-girls wrote love-letters to the Captain. The parents Melissant lingered at Aix les Bains, for "your mother," wrote Melissant, "skips her treatment five days out of the seven"; and "your father" wrote Mevrouw Melissant, "is too happy at the Casino." The position was reasonable: they would never have gone for the baths.

The child, Mary, grew and developed wonderfully. Freule Imka saw this most clearly, but everybody did his best. The mother would hang for long spells over the baby-face, in appeal to a mystery that the dark eyes held fast. "She has your eyes," said Rutger a dozen times. "No, yours," Eva once said timidly. "Not the colour, perhaps, but the look."

Rutger laughed uproariously. "The look? That must be second childhood in me."

There was peace at Skilda, a long, dull peace. Lap kept house at Sans-Souci, and Melissant sighed with relief, at thought of him, in Savoy. The chauffeur had been paid, double for his bruises: another chauffeur drove, grumbling, to the music at Rexlo. The Dominé, having been informed of these visits, preached a series of discourses in which he plainly proved the Babylonian origin of almost all Popish rites. Mevrouw Dickert waxed visibly smaller, thinner and sourer, as "the Rabbi" grew, less noti^eably, slower, yellower and glummer, in the tall sheep-pen of Skilda. "A man of

your gifts!" wailed Mevrouw Dominé, at intervals, like a squeaky door. Dickert, in a swift renewal of friendship with Victor Hugo, entreated him, in the wide safety of the fields, to beware of a wife who sought golden fruit from the barren tree of learning. "She thought," said the Dominé, piling up his metaphors with a bitter relish, "that the stones of Babylon were —cake!" Victor Hugo spouted a little stanza in which he declared that not for him is the myrtle who seeketh the bay. "Of course not!" said Mevrouw Dickert, "he will bury his heart in Eva Knoppe's grave: anyone can see that. And she in her old age, will laugh at him for having done it!"

Marthe agreed with Mevrouw Dickert that everybody but Eva could perceive the poet's unuttered love. "My brother-in-law can, and he likes it, as any husband would. It flatters him. So he has the poor creature here for the regulation fortnight. And Victor Hugo helps about the library and the theatre club and lives in hourly dread of Sherlock. I must say this for Eva: she's too stupid about love-affairs to have an inkling. I used to think differently, last time I was here."

"That there was something between her and Gallas?" argued sharp little Mevrouw Dickert.

"Yes, but of course there wasn't. She's not that kind. I might have known. Look at her bending over that baby! A Madonna!"

"Maybe," snapped Mevrouw Dickert. "But my husband says the Madonna is only the Assyrian Goddess Phu, converted into an accidental saint!"

"Eva didn't need converting. She always loved beauty for art's sake, not like me I admit. I've a temperament. And he said 'occidental' for I heard him, and I don't think you've got the name right."

Thus did life flow on sluggishly at Skilda during that last long summer. Eva's heart lay becalmed in the shrewd guidance of the Father. She worshipped her child: she thought tenderly of Rutger: she felt kindly

towards those who lived around her, at rest. Then, in a blue evening sky, the storm burst.

Marthe rushed into the upstairs room, where Eva was playing a nocturne in the twilight. The girl's manner was over-wrought, but all had grown accustomed to that.

"There is someone downstairs must see you at once!" she panted. "Rutger is away till to-morrow."

"As you know. Who is the somebody? I will go down."

"No—see him up here! Fritz is coming in with the Dickerts. I'll carry them off to—to see the moon rise! It's Theo Brent."

"Theo Brent? He's in India!"

"No, he's here. He's behind me." She fell back at the door. "Come in, Theo! Tell her all."

A personage entered in whom Eva, even under a fierce gas-flame, would never have recognised the gay midshipman. For his head was half-hidden in an absurd black wig and beard, as if he had fallen through a cheap hearth-rug. She turned up a little electric lamp of Rutger's constructing: to her indignant amazement Marthe dashed it to the floor.

"Hear him in the dark," said Marthe. "You may prefer it." Well-known voices rang from the garden: Marthe flashed down the stairs.

"What is it? What does this mean?" said Eva. She waited in the horrible shadows and shimmers of the long, lowering chamber. The wainscot grinned at her, from behind the roses. In the casements stood great squares of staring light.

"It means that I've come back. I've deserted. I couldn't stand the last six months."

"Deserted! Oh, Theo, then you're ruined!"

"Ruined? I was ruined long ago. I'm ruined by *her*." He dropped on the couch in the corner. He cast the stupid wool from his face, and crouched with his peaked chin on his fists.

"I couldn't wait any longer! I was mad, dying,

athirst for the sight of her! The touch of her! Dizzied in the choking-hot nights by the dream of her hair!"

"Hush, Theo! Oh, hush!"

He turned his eyes only: they flashed like flames, in the shade.

"Ruined? Yes, it is true: it was worth while. Did you know what I said? Athirst, in that heat, waking and dreaming. They say people go mad with thirst—I went mad—I'm here!"

"How can you speak to me like that? You are mad still."

"I speak to you as I think fit. Oh, the mask's off. I'm not speaking pretty drawing-room talk, lady-talk: I'm speaking as a man to a woman. You understand me."

"I will do what I can for you," she said, much shaken. "Of course I am a married woman: it is good that you came to me. In the first place we must save you. Surely you are in the greatest danger. You think we can patch matters up somehow? Rutger has influence. So has my father."

"No, you can't patch matters up. I don't want them patched up," he said.

"You don't want to be court-martialled?"

"Oh, don't stand reasoning there!" he said passionately. "We've got to act. I know how. That's why I came here."

She hardened. "I am ready to listen to you," she said haughtily. "As long as I can."

"Longer! I came from Paris. I ran straight away from yon boiling hell, on a French ship, to Gallas. You know I had met him out there: we rather chummed."

"He spoke of you when here."

"I went to him and asked him for money to take Marthe to England. He gave me a beggarly hundred pounds."

"That seems generous to me, but you cannot mean——"

"Generous, does it? You have curious ideas of generosity. He made four thousand by a few hours' flight."

"Theo, what madness is this about Marthe? You talk, as if it were nothing, of ruining yourself and her."

"*You* talk as if nobody ruined themselves for love!" The reply came like a returned ball, unexpected, on her chest.

She staggered. She leaned against the twinkling black of the wainscot. The windows bulked grey.

"I've thought it all out," he continued quickly. "I knew about England through Cissie's book on divorce. You can get legally married there any day by a parson, if you offer him fifty pounds. That's what it all comes to. While, here, of course, you want dozens of certificates, and all your relations have to come and say they approve. I've got to cross with her to-night in a herring-smack, and be married where I land."

"To-night!"

He mimicked her. "Do you want your husband to give me up? To tell you the truth, they wouldn't thank him. I quite realise that they have let me get thus far, and they'll close one eye, if I'll only wear a disguise and hurry across the water. They've had too many desertions amongst the men: they don't want a row about an officer. I'm drowned bathing. They much prefer that."

"Marthe! You forget she is my sister!"

"No, I specially remember. That's why I came up. You're the very person we want. Wait a minute!" He drew a paper from his breast-pocket. "Gallas gave me this for you."

"Thank you." She took the envelope and held it.

"I think you must read it now." The electric lamp lay on the floor. Her trembling hands dropped the matches. She was astonished to notice how calmly he lighted the candles in a copper sconce over her head.

She broke the seal—a Cupid—and, steadying herself

against the ledge and its photos, she read, one hand shading her eyes. Against her arm stood a bronze statuette, a smiling boy.

"I send you these by a sure hand. Tear up these words immediately, and forget me. It is madness, and wickedness to write. Only this once. Do not answer. I am breaking my promise. Only this once, for I couldn't help it. You will forgive. Do some good with the money for my sake. Forget me. I am happy as the day is—short!"

She gazed down at the signature.

"Udo": she gazed at the envelope.

She had not even noticed the white papers that had crackled to the floor.

Her companion handed them to her. "English bank-notes," he said, controlling mingled awe and contempt. "Two thousand pounds!"

She stared dumbly at the flimsy scraps of paper—she had never seen the tenth of such a fortune before.

"It is money that he sends you," said Theo Brent.

She faced the man, still dumb, with the flicker of the candles in the dark splendour of her eyes. She had moved away from the wall.

"Say what you want to say, whatever it is—and have done with it. I shall defend my sister against you as long as I can."

"A pretty creature you are, Eva, to defend your sister! I have read that note."

"You lie. Udo is a man of honour."

"Oh, we're all that! And women of honour! Look here: I wish I could waste more time over it. It isn't a nice thing, I admit, but I was hard-pressed. Udo was too anxious over that letter: I felt its importance. I opened it. I bought that pretty seal."

"Ah! And you took out some of the money!"

He stamped his foot. "D—— it! I'm not a thief."

"Are there degrees of villainy? You must teach me to distinguish." Her heart was beating wildly, yet how icily she forced forth the stinging words!

"You speak thus!" he cried. "You who talk of a generous hundred pounds and receive two thousand from your para——"

She flung the notes where they had just lain, at his feet: her freed hands were on her ears.

"You want the money!" she said. "That's what you came for! That's why you opened the letter! Take it, deserter! I suppose it'll buy your silence. Yes, Gallas loved me! But don't let me hear *you* talk of him. It hurts."

Brent gathered up the precious papers, and, as she sank into a chair: "After all, he asks you to do some good with the money," said Brent, "and what could be better than helping your sister?"

"To marry a deserter?"

"It is better to desert before than after marriage," said Brent.

"No, you can take the money and fly to England. You must leave my sister here."

"That is impossible, for the simple reason that Marthe has already bicycled several miles ahead. I shall catch her up per motor, and the authorities, I feel confident, unless your husband compels them, will not stop the fishing-smack. We shall live happily in England on an allowance from your father and your—very kind help. I shall be grateful."

"You have told Marthe?"

"Marthe will be very grateful too."

"She is gone, you say? It isn't true. She's downstairs."

"Will you ring and find out? Let me resume my obligatory disguise. Why are you so angry with Marthe and with me, Eva? I thought you—*you* would understand. We've never pretended. She's been half-mad all this time, she says: anyone could see it. So have I. You've managed better, but I didn't think you'd keep it up with me, now I know!"

"I must save Marthe!" said Eva.

"You prefer to have her back here—disgraced?"

Eva's head sunk low on her bosom. Theo Brent drew his hat over his eyes and crept in silence to the door. He opened it, into the dark of the passage; a vague form rose, growling. The man sprang back.

"Oh, it's that brute!" he screamed. "He won't let me pass."

Eva looked up. "He doesn't like—some strangers. Theo! Theo!"—she came after him. "Swear that you'll marry her there, according to their laws. I don't care about your gratitude—not so much! Listen! Swear, I say—or the dog pins you there, whilst I rouse the house!"

"How absurd you are! Of course I swear. Do you think I'd have deserted and made an everlasting outcast of myself if I hadn't first resolved to stick to her to the end?"

"Sherlock—honest!" said Eva. "Honest. Ah!" She listened long after the man's steps had died away. And again she said "Honest!" The dog had manifestly not believed her. He came into the vague candlelight and his face said "No."

Her eyes met his with an acquiescence in which he readily read assent. His long keen muzzle curled with canine contempt. He had been taught, through his severe and sober life-course, to distinguish evil from good by simple rules, hard and fast. Like all successful police-dogs, he lived alone, self-centred, unpetted, on duty. He had never understood this woman who had come into his existence and who did not know what duty meant. And now, as he looked at her, his gaze assumed an expression of almost unendurable reproach.

He bent to sniff at the paper on the floor: she snatched it from him. "Honest!" she said again vehemently, "Honest!" disgusted with herself for lying even to this dog. She drove the creature out and sat down, silent, clutching the letter, in the flickering gloom of the two candles, with the violet night outside.

In the long stillness the liveried booby knocked, far

too loud. His clumsiness never kept him from doing what he wanted. He brought, between his fingers, a note, from Marthe.

"I have told you to take a tray," she said.

"May I go to bed?" he replied. She sent him off, hastening to read her sister's farewell.

"You needn't bother," wrote Marthe. "Would you have married Inbreng? Yes, perhaps you would—and then have flirted with Theo. Well, I prefer to be 'poor and clean.'—Marthe."

"P.S.—I must say I should never have thought it of you, Eva."

She blushed a deep red in the lonely dark. Slowly she tore up Marthe's note, very small.

The whole house was asleep. She roused herself and lighted a number of candles. The black room flickered and grinned, with little twinkles and winks, amongst the black old furniture.

"I love him," she whispered. She glanced round in alarm.

It was quite a long time before she moved, before she spoke again.

She passed very slowly alongside the top ledge of the low wainscot. She paused by the laughing faces of friend and acquaintance. She spoke to them, one by one, meeting their eyes:

"I love him," she breathed.

She said it to the light-hearted paintings, to the Cupids and Harlequins in water-colour and bronze.

"I love him," she repeated, clutching the little letter to her breast.

The whole chamber was full of listening and wonder, of mystery and sin.

She came to the statuette that Father Bredo had given her, a small ivory, in white and brown, of the Virgin and Child.

"I love him," she said aloud.

And suddenly she fled from the room, with swift steps, along the passage to the nursery. The girl who did for

little Mary the one-tenth that her mother could not do, lay snoring.

The child also was asleep. The mother raised it with fond precaution, drew it softly to her bosom, and crept back, almost on tiptoe, along the creaking boards.

In the room she stood uncertain, the child enfolded in both arms. Then, with a prompt resolve she placed her burden on the couch in the corner. She sank beside it. Little Mary, restless for a moment—the mother hearkened with bated breath—slumbered on.

"You are his!" panted Eva: her glowing cheek touched the child's body—"You are his, little Mary: you are his! *You* are his sign of life to me: you are all I want: you are too much! I love him. You, too, you would love him, if you could! I can tell you about him now, for months—for long months I can tell you. When you're older you'll hear about him—how famous he is! —I sha'n't be able to tell you anything then. Now I can tell you I love him—sleep on! You are his. The Virgin may have sent you, little Mary: but I know—oh, I know you are his!" A score of times she whispered the same sentences: she caressed the words again and again.

She rose: she went to one of the sconces, and still gazing intently at the sleeping infant, she held Gallas's single love-note in the flames till her finger-tips dropped the charred scraps.

Then she stole back to the couch in the corner, and, encircling the tiny figure with one arm, she lay close against its innocent breathing till the early summer morning coloured, a faint mauve, against the black gloom of the casements.

CHAPTER XL

WHEN Melissant wandered into Skilda for the autumn shooting, he declared himself well satisfied with Eva.

"You do your duty to child and man," he said, "and you seem to be quite contented over it. Anyone can see you like Rutger enough and love Mary too much. It's the usual thing. Your mother was unusual. I am glad to say she liked me too much and loved the children enough." He stretched himself, with especial approval, for a cigarette in the old upstairs room.

"Father, I want to talk about things!" said Eva. "Marthe! How you must have suffered!"

"Ah, you have noticed my second grey hair? I have left it there as a living sermon! But it wasn't Marthe: it was Aix. It warns me never to gamble again."

"You can't mean that!"

"Of course I mean it. Don't be silly! I have never staked more than I cared to lose in all my life, but that one night. True, it was Marthe's fault in a way: it was the night she sent us her egregious letter. But the thing had a salutary effect on your mother. She said she felt so smirched she took her steam-bath regularly all that week."

Eva rose to re-arrange some white asters—great stars. "She *is* married, isn't she?"

"Certainly. According to the laws over there. He sent me a signed document of some sort, and he wrote very rudely because I hadn't registered it back. As if they hadn't done the real registering in a vestry! He must be quite stupid: it's provoking that Marthe, who was the smart one, should have introduced a fool into the family. All the old novels used to fuss over parish

entries: you remember the delightful history of Louis XV.'s du Barry?"

"No, father."

"Well, you must get Aunt Imka to tell it to you, when you're 'amongst yourselves,' as she says. Oh, Marthe's all right. Ce n'est pas un crime, c'est une méprise: that's *her* affair! They'll always have to live in England; the Government have intimated that it needn't even be under a feigned name, if we put up a stone to him in the Nieburg cemetery. I've hastened to do so—old Brent wouldn't go halves: wasn't *that* shabby beyond words?"

"The Brents' father is an apology for the Brents."

"H'm! I've at least had my fun out of the inscription. It ought to have gone in French: 'A la sacrée mémoire'—eh? That being impossible I got a neat little Latin thing, through Victor Hugo. 'Sacred to the memory of Theodore Brent, *shipwrecked in sinu Formosæ*' etc.—*i.e.*, drowned in the Gulf of Formosa—that's all right. It looks very nice, and the Indies are far."

"When I think of us all, I admire you for still wearing your ring," answered Eva.

Melissant started. But he thanked his stars that he had long ago compromised with his spouse and his emotions and bought a very similar jewel at his jeweller's. "Thus we appease the gods," he had thought as he docketed the bill.

"You are quite mistaken, and I only wish I could convince you," he said. "Not one of my children has caused me serious uneasiness, except Mom. *His* extravagance is a real worry—for his sake, not mine. Look sensibly at Marthe's case if you can. She's quite happy. He might not have married her—oh, *there!* Why should her self-willed happiness annoy me? She has the same allowance as yourself."

"Father, if I had run away to Udo?"

"I should have tried to forget you. And should have nearly succeeded. But don't call up disagreeables that

didn't occur. That's quite weak. However, *as* you speak of it, I would much rather you ran away elsewhere than were miserable at home. Mind that. I should not allow your disappearance—for you would disappear—to disturb my dinner. There would be one little person I should sincerely pity, if you made yourself happy that way. But I have no doubt many innocent little people are very unhappy at this moment, yet I enjoy my cigarette." He wistfully contemplated the red spots on his black socks. "Only in one case," he said, "should I be really unhappy about you. If I knew you were poor." After a moment he added: "But then you see, I should be too unhappy about myself to care much. For I should be poorer."

The house was very silent. Only a faint chirrup sounded from time to time along the passage. Melissant seemed contented the chirrup should stay where it was.

"Is tea coming?" said Melissant. Even as he spoke, a long smash rattled through the silence. "Good Lord, what is that?"

"The booby, as you call him, has fallen downstairs with the tea-tray again," said Eva.

"Then we shall have buttered toast and carpet."

"It's the sort of thing that maddens Rutger," said Eva, flushing. "I can't help it. He knows as well as I do that you can still get maids in this country but not men-servants. Yet, he thinks it's my fault."

"I am almost glad that Lap chips my razors," said Melissant apologetically. "Rutger must be sensible and only use the cheapest crockery, as we all do."

"I wash up the evening things. Father, before he brings up the remnants,—I didn't want to talk about Marthe, really: I wanted to talk about myself."

"Naturally. So you began about her."

"No, but listen! I want you to do me an immense favour. Immense. But you will. You are going to Paris."

"I had no such intention. There is nothing on."

"Oh yes, you always have that intention. And there is always something on," she said coaxingly. "And when you next go—soon go—will you see Udo—only *once*—and thank him for me and say he must give up, and begin again."

"Calm yourself, Kiddie. And speak coherently. It's all right. Have you heard from him since—he left?"

"No—only that telegram to Rutger, and a little note through Brent."

"I don't approve the note. Have you ever sent him a message? Is the little note burnt?"

"Yes. There is nothing. That's why I ask you to speak."

"If I speak, he knows that I know."

"Y-yes."

"Try a cigarette, child! A whiff or two to begin with. You mustn't get like this!"

"It's nothing. Only, father, I feel I shall be able to stand it, if I know he is really happy, doing something, doing well. He must take up his ambition—he was *very* ambitious, in his own wild way. Tell him that from me, that only! He must *do!*"

"Good. I shall tell him nothing else. Except that you are happy and dearly love your little girl."

"Tell him I am contented and dearly love the little girl."

"I will write down the exact words," said Melissant, producing a note-book. "And I will tell him the letter is burnt."

"And the money—there was a great deal of money in it—given away, as he intended."

"Money? Whew?" Melissant stared at his daughter. She met his gaze for a moment, but soon she dropped her eyes.

"Is it possible?" said Melissant. "There was a lot of money in it! And of course you gave that money to Brent!"

He nodded his handsome head contemplatively. "Now I understand that they have quite enough to

live on when it seemed to me that they had only just enough. He lied to me: *that* I understood. An officer and a gentleman! An interesting exception to a very pleasing rule."

"You will, father—won't you? The boy's coming up!"

"Of course I will. But I do hope there's an amusing novelty of some kind at one of the theatres. Or a funny old friend, like the 'Belle Hélène.' You'd better look out of the window: you're rather flushed."

"He'll think it's about the smash. I make him dreadful rows, and he sees that I hate to do it."

With an air of the most natural indifference the tall booby dumped down common kitchen crockery and damaged cakes. Rutger, when he looked in later attended by his earthily smelling young brother-in-law, objected—not to the cakes, but the cups. Fritz fell on the food. His father sat watching him, with alternated smiles for the youth's working hands, and his working jaws.

"I suppose he's broken all the others," said Eva.

"I do wish we could get a good servant," complained Rutger. "One has to train them. The Bigis have such a nice Sunday-school boy. Margot converted him."

"From a gardener into a footman!" nodded Melissant.

"No, no: from the error of his ways."

"Oh?—you'd better try a Roman Catholic. Those still believe in hell."

"Well—that's an idea! It would give offence here, but it would vastly please the people at Volda. You might speak about it to Bredo, Eva. You never go there any more now; he asked me the other day if you were ill. Remember, my election, a few months hence, depends on them."

"I will consult him," said Eva.

"Why not take your fathe to hear that wonderful singing?"

"No men are admitted," said Eva, pushing across the last cake to her brother.

"True: it's a nunnery; I don't like nuns! I asked Father Bredo about it: the Baroness Bigi told me she wanted to go."

"The old Baroness? The Dowager! Oh, Rutger, I couldn't take *her!*"

"How nervous he makes the poor child," reflected Melissant, closing his eyes.

"She would only go to sneer!" explained Eva, flustered.

Rutger was vexed, but he was honest. "She says she's sure it isn't finer than their church," he said unwillingly.

"The noise in church!" Eva burst into such bright laughter, the others could not but join her.

"And if it were finer," continued Rutger, "she says it oughtn't to be. Church singing, she says, oughtn't to be fine."

"Does Margot agree with her?" asked Eva.

"I don't know. I suppose so," answered Rutger, confused.

"I don't doubt it. If Margot had a sensible mother, she would also always agree with her: and then Margot would be perfectly nice."

Rutger knit his brow. "Eva disapproves of the Bigis," he said to his father-in-law. "It is extraordinary how much she disapproves of now-a-days. When I found her at Sans-Souci she approved of everything."

"Her happy youth is to blame," smiled Melissant. "That's the fault with all my children. My youth was so wretched I resolved, at twenty, never to disapprove of anybody or anything. That was on the third of July, 18—; never mind."

Rutger Knoppe had life-long ideas regarding happiness and duty, but these he had wisely kept to himself.

CHAPTER XLI

WHEN the Baroness Bigi went to Rexlo—as of course she very soon did, having made up her mind to go—she went in the Knoppes' motor, and Eva sat by her side. She did not take Margot, because the dear girl was so impressionable, and fine singing always made her weep. "Not that I expect that singing to be what *I* call fine," said the Baroness.

The Freule Margot went a six-mile drive in more than an hour with the Freule Lexma instead. The drive was slow outside and in. For "Margot is quite sweet," said the Freule Imka, "and I never had much to say to a girl whose sweetness came to the top, like a crust."

"H'm?" said Rutger.

"I like the sweetness to be hid in spirits," said the Freule Imka, "like sugar in punch."

"For instance," said Rutger.

"For instance Eva," said the Freule Imka, with more spirits than sugar. "In my youth all the girls were good as gold, but nobody knew it. Nobody doubted it. And nobody taught Sunday-school."

"They would have taught Sunday-school: only there weren't any," said Rutger.

"They would certainly not. They would have left such things to the parson. To the person who was paid to explain the Bible. In my youth you went to church while you lived, and to heaven when you died!" The Freule tatted vigorously. "I wonder whether the nuns make such work as this," she said. "Without spectacles. At eighty-nine."

"I am surprised the Dowager went to *their* church!"

said Rutger, who never corrected his aunt's varying accounts of her age.

"It's not church," said the Dowager. She said it up in the gallery of Rexlo, and ever after. "Did you ever see anything so disgraceful as that?" she asked, and pointed to the painted Christ that filled the chancel-arch.

"Hush!" said Eva, her whole soul insurgent.

"My dear, there is no one here! I have never yet given unnecessary offence to anybody." The Dowager glanced round the six wicker chairs and dropped, as she imagined, her commanding voice. A voice inherited from her grandfather, a Dutch general at Waterloo. She flung up her, also inherited, beak. "The building *might* be a Christian church," she continued, "if it wasn't for that thing and the idolatrous pictures down below!"

The silent portress under the stairs, with big bonnet and bands, heard every word. One moment the woman hesitated, then she began to move her lips in a fervour of intercession. And through the bare white edifice, shadowed by the sinking twilight, the pure, calm singing soared from fifty prayerful voices, among the lofty arches and around the listening Christ.

"What do they do it for? *That* is what I should like to know," said the Dowager, as soon as she found herself in the motor again.

"It is adoration," timidly suggested Eva.

"Nonsense! Adoration doesn't sing as well as that. It's just a theatre performance among themselves, because they've got no men to perform to. Convents? You should read the 'The British Ante-Jesuit' about convents!"—she checked Eva's recusant outcry with an upward sweep of her long hand—"I will send you the paper; and I'm thankful I didn't take Margot; the poor child would have been quite upset. If you like to invite the others some day, I shall make no objection."

"Thank you," said Eva.

"I want you to come in, when I reach my house. There is a matter of exceeding importance I have

long wished to speak about. The moment seems opportune."

Eva was left to fret over this announcement until the door of the Dowager's private chamber—miscalled the library—had closed upon her. To her entire discomfiture the awful lady locked the misfitting pair of them into the awful room.

"Sit down, pray!" said the Baroness, pointing to the culprit's stool beside the desk and placing herself majestically in the seat of judgment. These appellations quite naturally suggest themselves; nobody had ever thus faced the Presence without feeling, whether daughter or dependent, that the only chance of mercy left you was hurriedly to kiss the rod.

The audience-chamber was as repellent as virtue unaided by any other good quality could render it. The grey walls were hung with worked texts and other hideous tributes of affection. There was a large map of the two hemispheres, painted in accordance with their religious diversities, largely black. Black was heathen—the mission-field. Red was Catholic—another mission-field. Alas, yellow—Protestant—was very small. Of the black leather furniture and the piles of goody-goody periodicals the less said the better. They fitted into the ugliness of the room.

Eva did not. She hung on the low seat in her exquisite winter clothing. Even the Dowager Bigi observed how well the things looked and how admirably she wore them.

"Let me be quite frank!" said the Dowager. "That is my speciality: you must have remarked it!" She waited, with an unanswered invitation. "I can't always be complimentary, like the good old Freule. Well, at least, you know, I don't tell tales behind your back. I'm straight, not broad!" The Dowager had assumed her best bonnet and fine furs for the visit: she soared, like some ruffling bird of imperial prey.

"I see," said Eva, outwardly mastering her anxiety, accustomed to almost constant anxiety now.

"I cannot better prove to you, how much in earnest I am," continued the Baroness, "than by admitting that I chiefly got up this little excursion, so as to have you to myself, and to form my opinion of what is now-a-days called your mentality—I say soul."

"That is rather dreadful," said Eva faintly. "I don't think I have one. We were always taught not to."

"Please forget for a moment what you were taught!" exclaimed the Baroness sharply. "I pity you from the bottom of my heart and the height of my own God-fearing home."

"Yes," said Eva very humbly.

The Baroness simmered down. "I am so sorry for you," she admitted heartily. "You have so manifestly done your best. When you first came I thought Rutger Knoppe had made a big mistake."

"Yes," said Eva again. "Would you mind telling me what you really want to say? I think I should like that best."

"You must let me manage in my own way," replied the Bigi with renewed asperity. "I have driven a long distance in the motor-car, a danger to which I never expected to expose myself, but Providence can preserve us in all our ways. Will you have some milk? I don't take tea: it's injurious." She indicated the bell: Eva rang, and two glasses and two biscuits appeared.

"No, thank you," said Eva.

"As you choose. You may have noticed that Margot is my favourite daughter. A mother cannot help these preferences: a wise mother combats them."

"She is your youngest," said Eva sweetly.

"She is: her father always called her his Benjamina. Well, I want you to give up your friendship with Margot. I want you—I am frank, you see—to quarrel with her: *Une brouille!*"

"You don't think I am worthy of her!" cried Eva, mantling.

The Dowager flung up her head. "You mistake my

meaning entirely. You had better pray for enlightenment," she said in sharp snaps. Eva waited, subdued.

"Yes," repeated the Dowager. "Pray for enlightenment, and then quarrel with Margot. It doesn't sound right, but I'm sure it is. Are *you* passionately interested in politics?"

"No," said Eva, bewildered. "I try to talk sensibly about them for Rutger's sake."

"Be sure, you fail. Have you read the great Leader's works, more than my whole library?" She glanced round her meagre shelves. "Margot has. She says she understands them, but I doubt it. I hope not. I strongly disapprove of *any* woman interfering with the subject. Look what comes of it! Maintenon! Pompadour!"

"I listen to my husband," said Eva.

"He is your husband. Margot listens to him too. She thinks him the most wonderful genius that ever lived. Perhaps he strikes you that way also?"

"I admire him greatly," said Eva with downcast eyes.

"Just so. And you naturally share his daily labours in his villages, his tobacco-fields, his parliamentary candidature. The election will be—how shall I say?—a culmination. It is that has induced me to break silence. Yes, before the election you had certainly better quarrel with Margot!"

"I don't know how. I never quarrelled with anyone in my life."

This was quite an unexpected complication for the Bigi. "Why, there's nothing easier! There are a hundred ways," she cried.

"I will tell her I am jealous. There, you see I can be frank too!" answered Eva, suddenly staring straight at the older woman.

"I do not take your meaning," replied the Baroness. "If it's a joke, I should not call it a funny one."

"I warned you I was not good at quarrelling," said Eva.

"You can tell her you intend to become a Roman Catholic. Then of course I shall forbid her the house."

"But I don't intend to become a Roman Catholic."

"Don't you? Everybody is saying so. How curious is your difficulty! But for my religious sentiments I should quarrel with everybody I know." After this avowal the Dowager seemed to consider the discussion concluded. She finished her milk, gazed out of the window and said that it was late.

Eva took this broad hint and departed. "You may be quite assured I shall do all *I* can," said the Dowager, "but the start must come from you." The terrible old woman sat down to write a kindly letter to a missionary's daughter in South Africa. "I avail myself of this quiet hour in my peaceful library," she began. "Library, not boudoir," says the Dowager. "*Je ne boude jamais.*" Presumably that is true: she does not sulk, on occasion: she slaps.

Eva drove home, distressed, but not angry with Margot. A few months ago wrath and scorn would have shaken her. Not now. She thought of her own long resolve not to know she loved Gallas, of her sharp struggle against the knowledge, when she could no longer elude it, of her gladly piteous surrender in the end. The three stages stood out serenely in her memory. Our hearts are too strong for us. How foolish, how unpsychological to fight our own hearts! She had turned her eyes away and dreamed of peace, till the whole world around her was aflame with the sense of him: then she had wasted her strength in what seemed to her almost successful combat, and lo he had stepped in quietly, and conquered with a touch!

She was sorry, therefore, only sorry for Margot, not angry. And she tried to realize Rutger Knoppe as "the greatest genius that ever lived."

She wanted to hurry up to her own room, to be quite alone with all the life that was left to her, with herself and little Mary. And the holy thought of the holy nuns at Rexlo.

"Mynheer came in but didn't stay," said the servant. "He went to tea with Freule Lexma."

Immediately she turned on the stairs and went out again. She felt impelled to join them. Margot would be there.

Their voices reached her, ere she entered, in eager discussion. They had snatched at a topic which was stirring the whole country, the question whether revolutionary schoolmasters might expound the benefits of republicanism in government schools. "I understand your objections," Margot was saying, "still, the *Clerical Sentinel*——"

Eva came in: the Freule Lexma looked up from her work.

"Margot is praising the guillotine," smiled the Freule. "A Freule Bigi."

"I—the guillotine?"

"Of course. The republic means the guillotine."

"But mamma——"

"Your mother is twenty-five years younger than I. I perfectly remember *her* mother, a little girl in pants."

"The whole squabble seems so meaningless," said Eva, selecting the most comfortable chair, not an easy undertaking: only none of the three other occupants of the room knew or cared if a chair was comfortable. "Surely nobody wants more republic than we've already got!"

"You are quite mistaken," replied the Freule Bigi, who now prefaced almost every remark to Eva with these words. "An article in last week's *Christian Sentinel* proves that two-thirds of the elementary school-teachers are affiliated Socialists. The exact figures are——"

"Eva doesn't care for details: don't waste them on her," laughed Rutger.

"I care for the main truth," said Eva warmly. "Two-thirds is enough. And I understand their being Socialists. So would we be. You know we mightn't talk about politics at home, or we had to pay a fine. I

think father was wrong: he ought to have allowed a couple of hours a week!"

She expatiated on this idea, as she walked homewards with her husband. "You see there were such lots of other things to talk about as well," she explained. "Art, and the flowers, and the plays one had been to, and books."

"The two hours might have sufficed for those," said Rutger. "After all they are only the *hors d'œuvres*, for most people."

"Perhaps. The *hors d'œuvres* are much more varied, and much prettier to look at than the chop. Many people make almost their entire lunch off the *hors d'œuvres*. Anyhow, I care as much about politics as Margot Bigi."

"No, you mustn't say that, because it isn't fair," replied Rutger with fierce energy. "If she bores you, it is because she cares too much. She goes into the thing, heart and soul, as she does with her poor-work. I can quite understand her boring you."

"She does bore me—unutterably," said Eva.

He made no reply.

CHAPTER XLII

A COUPLE of weeks elapsed before Eva announced her intention of going to Nieburg for the day. Various small incidents had taken place meanwhile, but the story of a life can never be a whole life story.

"For the day? Why that only gives you a couple of hours!" exclaimed Rutger.

"That's enough. I can't stay away longer from Mary."

"But what do you want to do there?" She liked him to ask, though she couldn't reply. She had got to understand him and, as she had honestly said, to admire him. Perhaps she had married him because she so greatly trusted him. She felt vexed now if, with a semblance of indifference, he trusted her.

"I am going to get you a birthday present," she said quietly. "One I couldn't get anywhere else."

"You shouldn't tire yourself. You look ill. The care of the child has been too much for you."

"No, Rutger: you are mistaken. The care of the child is doing me lots of good. I don't know what I should do without the child."

"You needn't do without it," said Rutger shortly, for her tone indicated a possible existence without him. He came back into the room. "If you see your father, tell him that Fritz has learnt all he can here, and had better go on to some bigger place. He's a good fellow, is Fritz, with a strange liking for practical work!"

Eva did not intend to see her father. She had had a letter from him quite recently, a long letter full of all sorts of unnecessary talk. A long letter from a father who minimised his notes. Halfway amongst trifles lay embedded the following tit-bit:

"Whom do you think I met by the merest chance on

the boulevard? Udo Gallas. He seems to have had a splendid time, spending his money. He didn't look as if it had agreed with him. But now that's all over. He's going to fly again, he said."

The letter remarked, after a page more of chatter, that the writer's wife, Eva's mother, was quite happy, though rather stiff. "She would like to come to you, but Skilda, she says, is really too fearfully dull in winter. You must excuse her, Eva, it *is* dull. And she has got something going on here every day. She has a man too who massages her, much better than Knoppe."

From the train, as it curves towards Nieburg Station, you perceive the far tree-tops of Sans-Souci. Eva looked at them till she only saw tears.

She took a station cab and drove straight to Cissie Brent. There was a big brass plate on the door of Dr. Cissie's chambers. The lady sat in an inner sanctum with a bare outer office and a type-writer boy.

"So you're really a lawyer now!" said Eva, gazing at her.

"Of course I am. I defended a lad last week who had stolen some apples. I got him off on the family doctor's certificate that he couldn't possibly digest raw fruit."

"He hadn't stolen them?" said Eva.

"The mother had cooked them. Of course she swore she hadn't, so that was all right." Cissie nodded gravely, her bright little face well satisfied under its curls.

"You call that right?"

"Now don't come here to worry me, Eva. Have you studied law? It's technically right, and if you'd paid your fees, you'd understand. Hear that boy ticking? He hasn't any letters, but that's the advantage of a type-writer machine." She pushed aside a great slab of dummy volumes. "Isn't this neat?" In a cavity stood revealed an elaborate toilet apparatus beside an enormous looking-glass.

"Did you notice he knocked once for you? Twice means a man!" She nodded to herself delightedly in the mirror. Then she closed it up with a bang, and read "Digest of Criminal Law!"

"I am in rather a hurry. A client might come in," suggested Eva.

"No such—luck. I don't get many clients just yet, except *ex officio* ones. But that'll come."

"I am a client," said Eva.

"How so? Not about Theo, I hope. I am utterly ashamed and disgusted, and I never want to speak of him. All the same, father has no right to keep our dead mother's money from him, but I've said so plainly; and he'll send it."

"Theo doesn't need my assistance," said Eva, a little bitterly. "I have come to talk about myself."

Cissie settled her small body in her round desk-chair and assumed a forensic air.

"I want you to help me," stammered Eva, "because you are a woman who knows things I don't know."

Cissie bowed her head. "State your facts," she said. "I must know all you know first."

Eva recoiled. "Mine are questions. Would you mind that boy stopping his click-click?"

"I don't think I can: it's a matter of principle," replied Dr. Brent. But she went out to the boy and commanded in a shrill contralto:

"Look out that case in the Law Report—A 215—eighteen six six, number 2011."

"What case?" squeaked the boy.

"How inattentive you are! A 215, eighteen six six, number 2011." She came back to her seat. "Your question, madam? How silly of me! Professional habit, dear."

"When parents divorce, who gets the children? How does the thing work?"

"Eva!" For one visible moment the legal and the loyal clashed. "They *don't* divorce. They love the children. And they make friends."

"*I* should, certainly," said Eva with what calm she could command. "But how does the law go?"

"Do you mean in a case of separation or divorce?"

"Oh, divorce! So that both parties can marry again!"

A glimmer of surprise passed over Cissie's shrewd brow. "Well, you know," she said, "divorce is almost impossible in this country. To all practical intents, it can't be got, unless one of the parties confesses."

"Yes," said Eva, "yes. So I understood."

"His confession needn't be true—no proof is required. Of course it's almost always the man. So that really, because divorce is so excessively difficult, it becomes quite easy, by mutual consent!"

"Yes," said Eva. "Only the confession is required."

"All the same, when the man is a public personage, he doesn't choose to confess. A political candidate, for instance, couldn't."

"Of course not. What a good thing it is to be a woman of the law, Cissie. One thinks of all sorts of things. But, if the wife confessed, could she get the child?" No need to be a woman of the law, hearing that voice, to think of many things! A woman were enough.

"Hardly," said Dr. Brent, and her own voice quivered. "You see, I went through it all with Nina Loring. No: she would not get the child."

"Not even if the child were—were not——"

"You see," interrupted Cissie hastily, "the child bears the father's name. She—or he is his. And the father would keep his position, while the mother—well, you understand! Now, if you were judge?"

"Ah, I've so often looked at that of late—have you ever worked it out, Cissie? If one was supreme judge over oneself, compelled to pronounce sentence! What would one do?"

"It's easy enough," said Cissie. "You've only got to know the articles of the Code."

Eva smiled wanly. "I think I should condemn myself to go on sinning, after I was sick of the sin."

Cissie came and sat close to her.

"Impossible," said Dr. Brent gently. "Outside religion torture's no longer allowed."

A double knock resounded at the door. The lawyer started up, beaming: "A man-client!" she cried in excited tones.

"Can't I escape—here at the back?" exclaimed Eva.

"Wait a minute!"—Cissie ran out. She returned, crestfallen. "It was only my new hat," she said. "That idiot boy!"

"Let me see it!" proposed Eva, with ready sympathy.

"It was only the bill. The hat's at home. It's a beauty, the new shape, with the brim lifted at the back."

"When you can take a holiday, you must come and show it in 'Skilda church to Mevrouw Dickert. And you will see my pretty baby, and my husband."

"Your handsome husband. I hear he is to be your new member. And old Baron Knoppe has had another attack of some kind. He can't last more than a couple of years at most."

"Yes, all that is true, but nobody knows where the Baron will leave all his money."

"He will leave his money with the title: be sure of that! And you will come and live at Randik. It is a beautiful place."

"It is very near Sans-Souci and Nieburg," said Eva.

"You speak as if that were not an advantage?"

"Things change so much. One changes. Life changes," said Eva.

"You have grown quite serious and melancholy out yonder in the corn-fields. Black they are now again, I suppose, all black and bleak. And you don't look well."

"I don't care about that," said Eva. "I mean, about

the bleakness. I used to care, but that's long ago. I like dulness and silence, now-a-days."

Cissie lifted her eyebrows. "Are you staying over to-morrow? There's a fruit-ball at the Casino—you all go——"

"My train leaves in half an hour. I've a taxi-cab. You are quite certain? There's not a ghost of a chance that the mother would get the child?"

"Of course I'm certain. Not a ghost of a chance.

"Thanks. I must—tell my friend."

"Tell her gently, Eva. Put your arms round her neck and kiss her, as I want—as I am doing now."

Eva, under the warmth of this embrace, melted into tears. "You must come and see Mary," she sobbed. "She is a dear little thing. She has a look of Rutger, that straight stare of his! And Rutger, as you said just now, is a splendid man, is he not?"

"Rutger had a bright twinkle, as we first saw him here, in love."

"That is almost gone. He has grown much sedater, with all these commercial and political developments." Eva righted her hat before the mirror. "I am glad I came. You have done me lots of good. Remember, should anybody have seen me, you haven't. Good-bye."

At Skilda Rutger's first question was about the birthday present. "I couldn't get it," said Eva. "I shall have to give it up."

"The birthday present I should really like," said Rutger, "would be a reconciliation with the Bigis. It is absurd to have quarrelled with them, merely because Margot brought you those books against the Papacy. After all, you aren't a Catholic."

"I am not, but the books were disgusting. I had asked the Dowager before to leave me in peace, and Margot was aware I had. It's dull enough here—Heaven knows—without acquaintances whose chief object is to hurt you!"

"Well, I shall continue to call there. I think quarrels are vulgar."

"I do not ask you to espouse my cause. The note I wrote was not extravagant. I cannot help it, if the Dowager has forbidden her daughters our house."

"The Dowager is a stupid old woman, but Margot is the nicest girl I know."

"Margot may be nice, but the Dowager isn't stupid," replied Eva. She went upstairs, for she heard the child cry.

CHAPTER XLIII

THE winter was not yet past, before the dulness of Skilda came to an end, for ever.

Fritz first saw what was wrong. Just when everything seemed more or less right with the little family. People had been saying, all over the village, it is true, that Mevrouw Burgomaster looked "asleep." Aunt Imka explained to one or two intimates, that this was because the grand-nephew, whose praise seemed in everyone's mouth, rose so immeasurably beyond his consort's best attempts to follow him. "I have never met the woman," said the Freule, "who could be a worthy companion to Rutger. Perhaps, on the whole, he would have found most help in Margot Bigi. Poor charming Eva is stunned." "Asleep?" said Mevrouw Dickert, with shrewd emphasis, "Dreaming." She refused to explain, even to her "Rabbi," but she stated repeatedly that the stupidest woman could hoodwink the cleverest man. "When Marthe ran away," said Mevrouw Dickert, "I bicycled the first six miles with her, till Brent caught us up. Oh, I'm not ashamed of it. A church marriage is marriage enough for me. Better than broken vows,—eh, Solomon?"

"Broken vows? You read too many novels," said the Dominé, fetching down a folio.

"Reading them's better than living them. When I went with Marthe, I saw what passion is capable of. It's a fine thing, but you must own to it. I hear the elder sister throws the books I read on to the fire. Hypocrite!"

"Peace, Selena! Mevrouw Knoppe impresses me as a singularly pure-hearted woman. I love her face." Mevrouw Dickert screamed at her spouse and ran away.

She slapped one of her children, whose small finger was up its nose. "Keep your dirty habits out of sight!" she said.

Then she smilingly received Fritz, who came to take leave before undertaking the duties of a small Government post at Slaapstad. "What will become of the football?" she smirked. "And of the languishing beauties? There'll be suicides."

Fritz was bright and manly. He laughed at her.

"There are men worth committing suicide for," she said, bridling, "if you can't marry them any other way."

"I am going to dine with my sister," he answered. "Have you any message?"

"Tell her I hope soon to come and see the child. I haven't seen it for ages. I presume it's all right?"

"I suppose so. I don't know about children."

Mevrouw Dickert thought: "Nor does she." Yet it was Fritz, playing with little Mary after dinner, who noticed what no one had seen. Perhaps Mevrouw Dickert's words made him look.

He was dangling a glittering trifle before the small puppet, and the puppet took no interest at all. He waited till Eva had gone to fetch something, then he said: "Rutger, one'd almost say, she doesn't see it!"

"Nonsense," said Rutger. He came across in his quiet way. The next moment he was holding the child close to his little electric lamp. "I do believe——"

"Hist!" said the other man, face by face. "Here's Eva!"

"What are you two doing? Experimenting with baby?"

"Discussing the colour of her eyes," said Fritz.

It was a subject Eva had good cause to dislike. She took her little daughter away from them. "Children's eyes change so much in the first year," she said. She put Mary to bed herself, with much solicitude, and she wondered whether the Virgin would hearken, if she prayed that the child's eyes might turn blue.

Next morning Rutger did what less than a year ago

he would have considered underhand, however well-intended. He smuggled-in the doctor, while Eva was at the (now severely innocuous, Margot-reformed) library, the same doctor who had denied the possibility of little Mary's existence. The doctor said the eyes were all right, but of course you could ask an oculist.

So the oculist came—a really great man—on a day when Eva was gone to Rexlo and Volda, to interest the Father and the rest in Rutger's election, and to listen to Hermus' legends of the saints. Rutger planned it all. He laughed at the tales, but he knew how deeply they stirred Eva. "Real life?" she once avowed to him. "I have learned to loathe it. The life of miracle is the real life with God!" To Rutger she might as well have talked Latin at once.

The oculist was careful and slow. He proved very unwilling to speak. "This is your first child?" he said. "Your wife is many years younger than you?"

"Fourteen or fifteen," answered Rutger.

The fact seemed to afford the great doctor satisfaction. Four deep furrows ploughed their way down his big, benevolent forehead. "She will have other children," he said.

"What? You don't think this child will live?"

"I would not say that. But the others will help her to bear this sorrow. This is a child of sorrow, Mynheer."

Rutger poured out two glasses of port.

"Explain exactly, if you please. Take a biscuit?"

The professor took one. "Your little girl has at present lost her eyesight. You are prepared for my telling you this."

"Yes," said Rutger.

"She may recover it. There is brain-trouble. The case is not, I am sorry to say, an unusual one. There is a tumour somewhere, pressing on the brain. It can affect various centres. It has now touched the optic nerves."

"A tumour? Then she will die! Or you can operate?"

"No, she may live. An operation may be possible, in the far future. She would probably succumb. Last month we had a man of your age in hospital. He suffered no pain but had entirely lost his memory—even for words. The operator was not successful in finding the growth. The man died, and it was then discovered under the brain, where no treatment could have reached it." The doctor finished his port. "The child is otherwise healthy—the eyes are normal—yes, undoubtedly there is a growth on the brain."

Rutger sat staring into the purple decanter.

"You were prepared for trouble," said the oculist gently.

"Yes, but the mother is not!"

"Ah, these things are always hardest on the mother! She is emotional? There was great trouble, when the child was born?"

"Nothing unusual. Why do you ask?"

"The brain is diseased: we seek a connection. But we know little of these things, really, although we talk. My dear sir, I am exceedingly sorry, but I fear there is no doubt of what I say."

"Something can be done? A great deal?"

"Nothing. What would you do? Find the swelling? And if so, remove it? All you can do is to care for the poor little creature. This change in the eyes shows the growth is not stationary. It may cause other complications."

"She may recover?"

The wise man shrugged his shoulders. "Possibly! But we doctors reckon on natural developments, not miracles!"

"My wife believes in miracles!"

"Let her! Let her all she can! And as long as she can! She will need her belief."

The hired motor took the man of science back to Kykstad Station. Rutger remained puzzling how he should break these tidings to Eva.

She made it easier for him. She came down. She had taken off her things after the long day out yonder. She had seen to the child.

She came down. He was pacing his gun-hung den in a real agony of unrest. He could not recall ever having been so utterly upset. For he was conscious that she loved nothing on earth like this child.

The dog lay outside the door. She stooped over his vigilant head. "I am not afraid of you any more," she said softly. "I have been afraid for years. I think you know. Somehow you could ferret things out and betray me. You are uncanny. But others know who are mightier than you, and they will protect me." Then she went in. The dog, turning his keen snout, looked after her.

"Rutger, I want to talk to you about Mary."

"What?" He drew his hand over his big moustache.

"Her eyes aren't right. We had better face the fact."

"Who told you?"

"The Virgin. Don't laugh. It only pains me."

"I am not laughing. God knows!"

"Yes, God knows. Her eyes have been odd: one couldn't but see it. I didn't want to trouble you: you have so much else. But I asked the Virgin to-day, yonder at Volda, and she has told me."

"How—told you?" Rutger could not help reflecting that he had had the same information that morning for two hundred guilders.

"Never mind: you wouldn't understand. But, you see, when I came home just now, I had the courage to hold a candle close up to her face: I hadn't before. It—it—I often wished I had, but I couldn't. Now I've done it. She's—she doesn't see."

"I know it. I've just found out. Don't cry like that, Eva! We must bear it together."

"We can ask doctors, of course—oculists, what is to be done. I don't object to that. But I don't believe

in them, after what happened—about her birth. I have laid her entirely—her whole life—at the feet of the Mother whose name she bears."

Then he told her all he had learnt, emphasising his wish to spare her.

"Yes," she said. "Yes: that was good of you, Rutger. We can go to more doctors, of course. But the child is in God's hands, and perhaps"—she broke down again—"perhaps He wants her to be blind, this little time on earth. In His love!"

"You sometimes talk, now-a-days," he said—not then at once, but long afterwards, "as if this life were scarcely worth your while."

"Oh yes, it's worth living—worth living!" she said, "but only for the life that's to come!"

He sat looking at his pile of letters, left unopened in the day's distress. They were business letters, in connection with his future ambition and his immediate task.

CHAPTER XLIV

THE next weeks were passed by Eva in a strange dream of prayer. The world that, during her brief life-journey, had been first so vaguely bright and then so stormily clouded, seemed already to have sunk away into the gathering mists of time. Her own life for her own sake, as she had lived it, doing her best, seemed over, a thing finished, like a squeezed lemon: she fought, from the breaking dawn into the night-watches, for her child. For his child. She thought sadly, and sweetly, of Gallas. People once more spoke of him: he was beginning to fly again, it was said. He was the one man in the world, as she now knew, besides her father, who had stirred her nature to inner sympathy, to conscious union of interest and joy.

But the misty passion of prayer was for the child. The life, the health, the sight of the child. That this little creature she had born into the world might obtain what the world has to give—the light—the sunshine, the warmth. The little dully feeling, dimly thinking thing.

Day after day she carried the babe to Volda: day after day she laid it at the feet of the watching mother, of the solemn infant Christ. Doctors came to judge the case: she did not object to hear them. There was nothing to be done, they said: there were hundreds of such cases. She bowed gravely: this was *her* case. The far hundreds saddened her, yet they left her praying for her own.

She claimed a miracle, believing that she would receive it, from the Mother of Almighty God. To her, whose life had been so empty of religion, the divine seemed wondrously near in the human heart of the

Mother whose love lives eternal through the years. As she bent over the baby face, the blessed Virgin bent also: time and timelessness, earth and paradise met.

The dumb sacristan, creeping through the dim building, opened the inner shrine.

Father Bredo was seldom there. The discovery of a mural painting thirty miles from Volda occupied, for the moment, nearly all his waking hours. He had been informed of a costly new process by which a Frenchman undertook to remove the entire plastering uninjured to a distance and replace it: he was seeking to secure the treasure — and obtain the necessary funds—for his church. "We cannot compel miracles," he said to Eva: in going out he told Hermus that the lady could never hear enough legends of the blessed saints.

And yet, amidst all this passion of unearthly hope and yearning, it was Eva who secured, when the hour struck, Rutger's deeply desired election to Parliament. In the curious muddle of clerical politics there came a moment of much trembling in the balance, for the Catholics of the district fancied they could squeeze through a candidate of their own. Suddenly a hint came from headquarters—Father Bredo left his oil-stains that day to call on the Archbishop: the Romish mushroom disappeared: the tenants of Rexlo voted solid for the Skilda Burgomaster Knoppe.

"The Virgin hears prayer: in little things," said Eva, prostrate beside her baby's cot. "Yes, even in little things."

"Of course Rutger could get into parliament, if he chose," said Freule Imka. "I cannot understand his caring, now that you have to be ordered in by a lot of hinds. In my youth Government appointed you to make laws as it appointed you to fight battles. That had sense. I shall live to see him Prime Minister, but I wished he had begun with that."

"Eva!" said Rutger, after the first flurry of success. "I want you to make peace with the Bigis."

"That is hardly in my power. I do not love fighting."

"I am quite sure the Bigis do not. Margot has written me a charming little note to congratulate me on my political career. She chooses just the right terms. She has helped me all she could."

"I think we have all done that," said Eva.

"I do not deny it. But one feels that the girl really cares. The future of the country stirs her—what shall I say?—soul."

"Very well. If she calls, I will receive her."

"Oh-h! I should take it as a favour, if you would write her a little note,—say the whole thing had been a misunderstanding. As it was."

"Very well. I will write her a little note. You are sure her mother will approve?"

"The Baroness? Why not? She's taken ten shares in the new tramway."

"Well—you see, my sympathies are with the Catholics. I don't pretend to hide it."

"Look here, Eva. You must see that this is nonsense. I let you go your own way—somehow, now-a-days, we each prefer to do that. And of course I'm sorry about the child. I wish I could help you. But, after all, you aren't a Roman Catholic. You couldn't be one. You must see this is nonsense."

"Why? Why not?"

He stared. "You couldn't live in this house and be a Roman! The mother of the future Baron Knoppe! You couldn't live with us all, and amongst us all, and have priests about! You know that as well as I. I can't see what you're driving at. I can't see what the joke is. I wish you'd explain."

"Yes—yes," she said. "I must explain."

"Well—what is it?" His tone was impatient: his manner scarce friendly.

"Not just yet. You must give me a little more time."

"You are silly. My new duties will take us away from here a lot—to the Hague. We shall meet Bigis there—others, and relatives of theirs and mine. If they

ask about the old Baroness, who's highly honoured by everybody, we can't say we've quarrelled—it's too absurd, like servants! And what about, please? About Papistry, things we've got nothing to do with, neither they nor we!" He had worked himself up into a rage: he endeavoured to fight it down. The booby came to the door, to say that a man with a bad head wanted to see Mynheer Burgomaster.

Rutger moved away. "I shall only keep this on," he said, "till Fritz is old enough to take my place. He will make a first-rate Burgomaster of Skilda. The tobacco'd be a perfect success, if the man who supplied the funds through old Gallas hadn't arranged for the lion's share of the profits. However, if my uncle leaves me his money, I may be able to buy him out. Look here, Eva, you must see the absurdity of these complications you are causing! You don't think—you can't dream—I'd let my children grow up Catholics?"

"You—you would take her away from me?" she stammered.

"Do talk sense! We are not going to separate, and you're not going to "vert." The child's condition is trouble enough: you needn't make it worse. It would perhaps be all the better for her, if—no, I'm not going to say that." The booby, who at all times considered the claims of the lower classes paramount, knocked again, a loud reminder, and Rutger M.P. obeyed his call.

Eva remained alone with the words he was not going to say. It would be all the better for the poor little thing, if she passed out of his life.

She was pondering her note to Margot Bigi, when the booby announced Mevrouw Dickert. "I will do anything but eat my words about the Church," reflected Eva, as she closed the blotter, and laid the "Semper Fidelis" blade across it.

Mevrouw Dickert, far from easy, babbled about the future, with the air of a person who has something else to say. She contemplated her little feet, and bobbed

her feathers, and she said she had heard from Marthe and Marthe was doing well.

"I too have heard from Marthe," said Eva.

"She was a good sister to you," said Mevrouw Dickert, with something like a wink.

"I have never had cause to find her a bad one," answered Eva, wishing the woman would go away. She was eager to get to Volda, to pray there, to seek peace in perturbation.

"You are fortunate in all this fresh success, this new career, for your husband! I envy you!" sighed Mevrouw Dickert.

"The Dominé will not always remain in Skilda," said Eva. She took a lessening small interest in the Dominé.

"No, indeed, that he won't," said the Dominé's wife, with sudden spite. There was an awkward silence: Eva, as women will do, when worn out with emotion, yawned.

At this Mevrouw Dickert took extreme offence. "It would be a pity, if anything occurred to clog that new career!" she cried, rolling her eyes round the room.

Eva searched for some reply. "'Clog' is a good word," she thought.

"That doesn't look likely," she said at last.

"Perhaps not. Perhaps yes. I have also had a letter from your father. They are going to Aix again for several weeks."

"My father?" repeated Eva, with wide-open eyes.

"Yes: you seem very astonished that he should write to me? He has written before."

"He is such a very unwilling correspondent."

"Well, I will admit that I had written first," said Mevrouw Dickert, somewhat appeased. "You can understand why I wrote. It was about the Institute of Science."

"What about it?" queried Eva, glancing at the clock.

"How inconsiderate!" reflected Mevrouw Dominé. "Wait a minute: I'll wake you up!" She continued

rather gently: "The Institute of Science at Nieburg is in need of a new director."

"Yes, the poor old gentleman is dead. He had held the post close on forty years. It is a good post: there are more than seventy aspirants!"

"Eighty-three, but only two that matter. The decision lies between those two."

"Indeed?" Eva's eyes travelled over the other woman, the fat little feathered figure on the sofa. "Oh—your husband is one of the two—how interesting! And of course my father is president—nobody knows why." She bent herself to a resolute participation in the couple's hope and suspense. "Yes, my father is president, because they say he and mother receive so well, and he bears the expense of the suppers. He is quite influential there, I know."

"The matter rests entirely in his hands: he admits as much. But he says he has pledged his word to the other man."

"Who is the other man?"

"The man Perk—the person you call Victor Hugo."

"Victor Hugo! And he has pledged his word! Then I fear there is nothing more to be done!"

"Something must be done. At once. Your father leaves to-morrow night for Aix."

"We could reach him there, but what would you have? Victor Hugo is excellent."

"So your father says, in his own absurd way. 'He shall have it if he likes,' he writes. 'Lord, to think that he likes!' Absurd! Of course he likes!"

"Evidently his mind is quite made up," said Eva.

"The appointment will be made at a board-meeting before he leaves. That's why I came in to-day. You must act at once."

"I? How am I to act? I couldn't, if I wished. I am truly sorry for you. And glad for Victor Hugo."

"Don't be glad too soon!"—the sly wink changed to an open scowl—"You can act. You can write at

once to your Victor Hugo and bid him withdraw his name!"

"I can do no such thing. Mevrouw Dickert, your tone is very strange!"

"It has every reason to be," said Mevrouw Dominé nervously. "I must see this thing through. I've no time to lose. I don't like it, but our whole future's at stake. It's *the* chance for my husband. He must get it!"

"He cannot, if it has already been promised to another."

"That other must withdraw. I tell you, you must make him do it. Yes, he'll do it for your sake: he adores you."

"Mevrouw Dickert!" Eva rose.

"Please don't let us discuss!" Mevrouw Dominé also slipped off her sofa. "I know what I know. Not about Perk only. I don't want to talk. Please write!"

"I shall certainly not write," said Eva.

"That's your last word?"

"My last word. I hear the child crying."

"The child must wait one moment. You will write, Mevrouw, or I show your husband this!" With trembling fingers the parson's wife extracted from her reticule a document which she held aloft at some distance from Eva's eyes.

"Marthe dropped this on the night she fled. She was very excited. I picked it up: we spent five minutes looking for it on the road, but I had it in my hand all the time!"

Eva saw at once, before she read, what the paper contained. The burning words of Gallas flamed to meet her, in a strange handwriting—the words she had perused on that night, last of the preceding summer, words seared into her heart for aye.

She faltered, gathering her forces. "What of that?" she said.

"It is marked 'copy of the letter to Eva.' I don't

know which of your lovers wrote it to you, Mevrouw, and I don't care. Perhaps your husband will. At any rate he can find out. From what Marthe said I can put two and two together. She said you were worse than she, and I daresay she was right."

"You are absolutely shameless," said Eva.

"No, I'm not. I don't like this at all. I'm very frightened. But to get this work for my husband I'd—commit murder."

"You are near it," said Eva.

"No, I'm not. You've only got to send a line to your Victor Hugo, and nobody'll ever allude to the matter again."

"You believe that I am Perk's mistress?" exclaimed Eva. She leant against the table: her soul melted within her.

"No, I don't. You just write to him, and nobody'll ever be unpleasant again."

"And if I don't do this outrageous thing?" said Eva.

"Then we stay in Skilda, but not you," replied Mevrouw Dickert.

"He won't abandon his prospects for me!"

"Then you're not to blame, nor I! Only write!" Mevrouw Dickert had opened the blotter: she actually held out a pen. She smiled in her superior knowledge of the poet's nature. He had read her verses she had learnt to understand.

"Write just this," said Mevrouw Dickert. "'I want you to withdraw your candidature at once for my sake!' Perhaps he won't? So much the better! If you think he won't, you can easily write!"

"That is true," said Eva. "Of course he won't. There's no reason why he should."

"Nor any reason why I shouldn't show this paper to Mynheer Knoppe."

"You are a wicked woman!" said Eva: she closed her eyes. She felt sure that Victor Hugo would do as she asked.

"By no means. But I have your father's assurance

that my husband would have the post, if Perk were not there."

Suddenly Eva resolved to demand no further pity from this creature. She would fight the battle of the alternative with herself: in no case would she ask quarter. She would abandon the struggle, now at the supreme moment of the contest, making all her former efforts and successes void, or she would pay the price of her victory.

"You are a wicked woman," she said. "I won't repeat it: besides, you know it. You offer to sell me the peace of my home, and you're sure of your price."

"I never was good at metaphysics," replied Mevrouw Dickert, "but there can't be any wickedness in selling as long as there's people willing to buy."

"Not even in selling stolen goods!"

"Not if you sell them to the person you stole them from!" said Mevrouw Dickert triumphantly. She thought she had said quite a clever thing, but then she often thought that. She laughed aloud. "That child *is* crying," she said.

As she spoke the words, pushing forward the paper, she called up, intentionally or not, a vision of the child crying, alone, with a hired nurse, no mother near—the mother far distant, separated for ever, from this frail need and increasing suffering, as by a wall.

The inexperienced girl was already at the door, appealing as ever to her mistress. The child would not sleep.

"Withdraw your candidature for my sake. Eva Knoppe." She had taken the offered pen: the words were on the sheet.

Mevrouw Dickert drew the page towards her and tore the paper she had held into snippets.

"You might have kept a copy," said Eva.

"I believe you are a wickeder woman than I," said Mevrouw Dickert.

"Ah, no," said Eva. "Not that. No." She left the parson's wife standing in the middle of the room.

CHAPTER XLV

FROM the nursery, where she had lulled the child to rest, she went straight to Volda. It was a beautiful early summer evening, still wanting a couple of hours to sunset. The motor rolled smoothly through the dustless air.

She was glad, as always now, to escape from the house. She had never loved the house; there was only one room in it she did not loathe, the nursery. All her old horror of the wainscoted chamber had returned on her, increasing tenfold. She hardly crossed the threshold; Rutger had long given up teasing her about her superstition or her prejudice. "A murder has been perpetrated there: I am sure of it," she said. "I am quite sure there has not," said Rutger. But he left her in peace. He made that mistake of many a not-bewitched model husband—he left her in peace. She was glad to escape from the chamber with its photos and art treasures: but for the child sleeping in its cot she would gladly never again have entered the house.

This evening Father Bredo was in the church. Her heart leaped with passionate relief at sight of him. With the very exultation of despair.

"Ah, you are here!" she exclaimed. "That is good. I need you, I have committed a crime!"

"Do not speak so wildly," said the Father sternly. Her loose dust-mantle fitted her. He could not but notice how lovely she looked.

"I speak wildly of wild deeds," she answered. "Father, I have ruined a man to save myself."

"You must tell me nothing or all," he said. "Will you confess to me as if you were already a sheep of the fold?"

"Yes," she said. She crept away with him into a corner of the dark building under the shadow of the carved confessional.

"Some men would declare that I played with you," he murmured "and with the mysteries of our most holy faith; yet God knows that is not so."

"I hesitate on the brink," she said. "See to what sin my love of the child has brought me! Now I am tranquil in my fault. I have gone so far, I need go no farther. The last foe is discomfited. We are safe."

"God grant you His mercy," said the Father.

"He will grant me the health of the child: that is the miracle I have waited for."

"Are you sure He will reward you for the sacrifice demanded from that man?"

"Ah!"—her voice rang out—"That is right! Speak so to me! Speak so always! That is the tone I need, the truth which will save! Oh, had some helper, some warner stood near me before! I have always been alone. I'm so young still! I don't want to be wicked. I want to do right!"

"It's not the wanting, it's the doing," said the Father. "The wanting's no use. Men have thought they'd like to join the true Church for years and died in heresy. One came to me in the night-time, to my door, and cried that he must be saved ere the morning. With *him* I sat up till the sunrise and baptised him in the early dew!"

"Behold here is water," whispered Eva.

"Not so, child! You must learn: you must atone—You have your duty to your husband!"

"I do not love him: I love Gallas," said Eva. "Oh, God help me!"

"That is certain. When everything is uncertain, that is certain, child."

"But my wrong to Piet Perk! But the child they will take from me!"

"God will make all things clear to you. They will

not take the child, if things be as you say. Your husband's heart also, you think, is estranged from you? You must pray much, for indeed a miracle is needed to save you, body and soul."

"I care little for salvation—the child——"

"Hush! Ask for grace to comprehend your own heart. You care so much for your salvation that it has become your living torment! If at any time you know not where to turn, the sisters at Rexlo will ever give you kindly shelter and welcome."

"Indeed, I know not where to turn," said Eva. "I must go back."

"Go back! God help you! Remember, that is certain. But He can only help you to do right—not wrong."

"Give me your blessing," she said, kneeling.

"You have it. The blessing of the Lord, it maketh rich, and He addeth no sorrow thereunto."

She drove home to Skilda. And she went straight to her husband, strong in the strength of her strong prayer through one summer night.

Aunt Imka was with him. "I am just going," said the Freule. Isn't it a beautiful night!"

"Beautiful," answered Eva. "So calm."

"I was just telling Rutger that Margot Bigi has been to tea. She says she won't rest till you and she are friends again. And it appears she has actually read 'David Copperfield' without waiting for her mother's permission. "She is quite enthusiastic about Mr. Peggotty and Ham."

"They are beautiful characters," said Eva. "Look at Peggotty's devotion to little Em'ly!"

"He wasn't her husband!" said Rutger.

"They are quite common people," said the Freule, "with superfine emotions; and I don't think them interesting at all."

"But this other piece of news——" said Rutger. The Freule Lexma had run to the door. "Stop!" she cried, "I don't want to hear any more about it.

People die from all this talk about death. Just as your mother, Eva, catches gout at Aix! No, Rutger, not a step! My maid is gossiping in the kitchen. Good-night!"

The door closed on her. Rutger turned to his wife. "Udo Gallas is dead," he said. "Dropped!"

"No: that is impossible," said Eva.

"Too possible. In fact, everybody expected it. I hear he was quite unfitted to fly after the life he had been leading in Paris. His nerve had gone. But he would insist."

"I wonder," said Eva faintly.

"There is nothing to wonder at. And you needn't look so deadly pale."

"I loved him," said Eva.

"Eva, what absurd madness is this?"

"I love him. I may just as well tell you now. We have been wanting to speak about these things for a long time, have we not?"

"No, indeed. Nor do I want to speak of them now."

"Yes, you do. You will, when you come to think of it. You don't want, any more than I do, to go on like this."

"For Heaven's sake—like what?"

She dropped into a chair. "Married to me," she said. He was quite silent.

"You see? It makes it much easier for me to feel that I haven't quite spoilt your life. It's going to begin again. All the same, I have spoilt it. There's all the disgrace. I'm very, very sorry. Oh, Rutger, if you saw my heart, you would see it was one great red blot."

"You exaggerate," said Rutger, ill-at-ease. "If you had a penchant for Gallas, well, he's dead, and I can forget."

She looked long at her husband. He was just going to speak again, in the same tone of enforced lightness, when she stopped him.

"That day, when he came in his machine?" she said. "If he hadn't come that day, I'm not sure I should ever have known that I loved him. Certainly I should never have told *you*. But he came that day—you remember, we have talked of it."

Rutger's brick-stained face turned ashen-grey. "How you have lied to me!" he said, speaking slowly and softly. "How you have lied!"

"Yes, I have lied," she said. "I don't think I wanted to, but I have lied."

She looked away from him, round the dull room with all its familiar requirements of his country life and business. Its dark length lay misty in the gloom of slow summer twilight. Only in this corner they stood out under the glare of such a little self-constructed lamp as he had given her.

"I have lied to save us all," she said. "Or, at least, so I thought. Our home, and the child, you see, and your name! But you needn't feel angry about *that*. The suffering has been beyond what I could have thought possible—the suspense, and the shame! And now, when it's all succeeded, and everything's come right—now I surrender, and break down, and confess. Perhaps you'll think it very foolish, but it isn't really. There are things I thought I could do—sins I could commit—but I can't, God be thanked. Much has changed, and—and when God loves us, He doesn't let us do as we like."

"What would you have me to do?" he said.

Her glance fled back to him. "Be happy, and forget. Oh, I don't mean, forgive—I know that is impossible. I should never have liked you and admired you so much as I did—were you the sort of man who could do that! I am going away; you will get over the disgrace, and nobody will blame you. The—all your friends will support you, and help you to play your part in the Hague! And your uncle, who has always hoped for an heir!"

She caught her breath. She waited for him to say

something—something she could carry in her bosom, to the grave.

"Away?" he said. "Where?"

She sprang up from the chair to her full height. She leant forward. "You will let me take the child!" she cried.

"Where are you going? To Sans-Souci? What do you intend to do?"

"You will let me take the child! I must have the child! That is all I ask—the one thing. I'll go out of your life; I'll take all the blame. Oh, I'm guilty—I know I'm guilty—I'll say I'm guilty! But you must let me have the child."

"The child is mine too," he argued, bewildered, "I ought to look after it. The child is mine."

She dropped her face on her hands.

"Go—in—peace," he said, struggling with the words.

She stood panting. Then, with a great effort for increasing calm:

"I shall go to the nuns at Rexlo. They will receive me. If I go now, the singing will be over, the Thanksgiving. I shall be in time for the Intercession. A great change has come—a new life has come into my wicked life—I didn't know about it before; I'd never heard—you wouldn't understand, none of you. I can't help it."

She stopped, frightened. "You are far, far better than I," she said softly, "but you wouldn't understand. Let me go to the nuns. I have money, for Marthe returned me, a few weeks ago, with a cruel note, some money I had—lent them. I suppose his father has paid them a large sum he was keeping back. And my father will perhaps leave me my allowance. I shall care for—my child, and other sick children, perhaps, if they let me. I am done with the life of the moment; it is dead in me. But I think I can do that—love children. I don't think even a long life would be too long for that. And I must pray—I may pray—much,

never enough, for myself, and for you, and Udo-Gallas——" She broke down altogether in a passion of wild weeping—"for I sent him to his death!"

She wept, in his silence. He sat by the desk, squarely, his back to her, his fingers on the ivory blade.

She wept, in his silence. Till, very quietly, she drew a sheet from a paper-stand and wrote on it, firmly, in pencil:

"Pieter Perk, Sans-Souci, Nieburg. Destroy unopened, for my sake, the letter I sent you. Eva Knoppe."

"You must send this to-night, at any cost, to Kykstad. Promise me. That is all. I have nothing else. It is only that I asked him to do something for me, that now he needn't do. I have told you all, Rutger. And now will you let me go, please, to-night, to the nuns, with the child!"

"You must do as you think best, Eva. Only, only, remember—there are things we do that we can never undo."

"I have remembered." She moved to the door. "Rutger, you said once, before we were married, that, when people were sorry, we forgave. Oh, I don't ask for that now. But—later on, much later, if you think of me there, among my sick children, at my work, or my prayer, you must think of me as very sorry, and perhaps you may forgive. And I—I shall not hear of you, in the convent—never one word shall I hear from the outer world—but I shall know that you are working in parliament, because we have sent you there. And I think that I also can help you: I shall pray, in those hours, for your work."

"It isn't forgive!" he burst out. "I can do that now. It's forget!"

"That too will come," she said. "And perhaps some day, in time, God will grant me His miracle—for my child!"